VASSILY SHUKSHIN

SHORT STORIES

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RADUGA PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW
1990

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FOREWORD

Vassily Shukshin

MORALITY IS TRUTH'

Compiled from the articles,
speeches and letters of
Vassily Shukshin by L. N.
Fedoseyeva-Shukshina.

Here is my village...

Here is the house where I was born...

And here is my mother... Twice married and twice widowed, the first time at 22, the second at 31, in 1942. She devoted most of her energy, in effect her entire life, to her children. Now she thinks that her son is a success and has become a big man in the city. Let her think so. It was from her that I learned to write stories.

Here are my aunts:

Avdotya Sergeyevna. A widow. She brought up two children.

Anna Sergeyevna. A widow. She brought up five children.

Vera Sergeyevna. A widow. One son.

Widows in the 1941/1945 style.

They used to sing well once. Now they can't. I've asked them to, but they can't.

People of amazing endurance! I'm not prone either to exaggerating or belittling the Russian

national virtues, but from what I have seen, from what I was used to seeing in my early childhood, I'm sure that there can hardly be anyone else capable of enduring what the Russian woman can endure, and has endured. God forbid that anyone on earth should ever have to endure so much. Life should not be like that.

They are not aware of this. And I only began to understand it myself many years later. And I felt I wanted to tell their stories... Their stories and the stories of the other people in my village.

I was nine when I arrived in Biisk with my parents... The place frightened me. There were so many people! And everyone was rushing somewhere. And no one knew anyone else. In our village everyone knows everyone else. This was an immense new world.

I was frightened to death the first time I walked across the squeaking, swaying pontoon bridge... That was the first wonder that I saw. Gradually I came across other wonders. For instance, the fire station. The observation-tower totally bewitched me, and I swore that I would be a fireman. Then I wanted to be a sailor on the steamship *Anatoly,* and then a driver, so that I could drive on to the bridge, and it would settle under the weight of the car...

But once I had been to the bazaar, I decided that I would definitely be a petty-thief-l thought that in that bustling crowd, with so much stuff lying about, it would be much easier to pinch a melon than from Aunty Semyonikha's kitchen-garden in our village. (I did not know the criminal code at that time.) But then the idea of being a

fireman won out after all—I really liked the shiny helmet.

Then the war started, and we went back to the village. My father went to the front.

That early spring morning when I left home, I was sixteen years old. I still wanted to run and slide on the smooth, thin, glassy-bright ice, but I had to go off and find my way in a wide, mysterious world where I had not a single relation, where I didn't even know anyone. I felt sad and a little bit afraid. My mother saw me out of the village, made the sign of the cross over me before I set out,

sat down on the ground and burst into tears. I understood that she was afraid and in pain, but clearly it is more painful for a mother to see her children hungry. My sister stayed behind, she was still little. But I could go, and I did.

I found myself back in the town, as a student at the Automobile Engineering College. I was older and a bit braver. But the place still frightened me. I had to understand too many things differently. The horizon had moved too far into the distance, and life was huge and complicated.

...No. No matter how deep I look within myself, I find no "suppressed malice" against the town. The only thing approaching dislike is envy of the town, because it lures the young people away from the village, and this causes me pain and alarm. It is painful to hear the unhealthy silence descend on the villages in the evening: no accordion wandering aimlessly, no songs to be heard... The cocks crow, but even here something's not quite right, they sing too many

"solos". There are no fishermen's fires glowing beyond the river, no hasty gun shots thundering out in the dawn on the islands or beside the lakes. The marksmen and the singers have all moved away. It's worrying... Where have they gone to?

If the economist and expert on social phenomena can demonstrate with figures that the outflow of population from the village is an inevitable process, he can certainly never demonstrate that it is painless or lacking in drama. And art is surely not indifferent to the path trodden by humanity . Especially in such large numbers.

The man of the village, the peasant, is a man of great kindness, and his kindness is obviously extremely important nowadays, in our turbulent, mechanised world. We should do well not to forget the soul. We should do well to be a little kinder, not to forget, in our high-speed lives, that we are people, so let's be... We are only given one chance to live on earth. So let's be a little more considerate to each other, a little kinder.

...So now as I come close to forty, I am neither a genuine town man, nor any longer a villager. A terribly awkward situation to be in. Not even like falling between two stools, more like having one foot on the shore and one in the boat. You have to swim, but you're afraid to. I know it's not possible to maintain such a position for long before you fall. It's not falling that I'm afraid of (what fall? from where?), I just feel really uncomfortable. But my situation does have its positive points. The comparisons, and all the

to-ing and fro-ing "from there to here" and "from here to there" automatically turn up ideas not just about the "village" and "the town", but about Russia.

...Nowadays, for all our libraries, museums, cinemas, radio and television, acquiring culture is by no means simple. You need help to get started. Such help can take almost any form, but it is always essentially the same-intelligent, kind and disinterested. It just happened that from the age of about twelve I was helped in choosing what to read—first by a Leningrad schoolteacher who happened to teach in our village school during the war. I had developed an abnormal passion for reading, but I was a poor student. My mother couldn't understand what was wrong and she went to the teacher. She came to our house, asked what I read ... and drew up a list of the books I should read. She said that when I read those she'd draw up another list. I can still remember the library in Sebastopol... I was in the navy and I used the officers' library. And the elderly woman librarian there might as well have had a list too...

The final list was drawn up by Mikhail Ilich Romm when I became his student at the Àll-Union Institute of Cinematography. I can remember almost all the books on these lists, many of them figured more than once... I would be glad to draw up a list for someone myself, I believe in them so much now, and I am so grateful to the books and the people.

At one time I was a teacher in a village school for adults. To be honest, I was no great shakes as

a teacher (I had no special training and no experience), but even today I still remember the warmth and the gratitude in the eyes of the young men and women who had already worked hard all day long, when I managed to tell them something important and interesting in an interesting manner (I taught Russian language and literature). I loved them at moments like that. And in my heart of hearts I was proud and happy to believe that here and now I was doing something really worthwhile. It's a pity that there are so few moments like that in our lives. They make us happy.

They ask me how it happened that a village boy like me suddenly upped and left for the Literary Institute in Moscow (not surprisingly, of course, they didn't accept me—I'd never written a single line in my life: I joined Romm's class in the school of directing at the Ail-Union Institute of Cinematography).

The need to take up the pen and write seems to be natural to the disturbed spirit. It's hard to think of any other motive that could move a man who knows something to share his knowledge with others.

I was born in the countryside, a traditional peasant. I went to work very early. During the war we didn't finish school. After seven classes of study I went to work. At fourteen. I went to work, and then ... my time came round and I joined the forces and served in the navy. And only

afterwards did college studies become part of my life.

Before that I had passed the tenth-class examinations as an external student. In other words, the period from the beginning of my independent life to the opportunity to make sense of everything that I had seen in the institute-some ten or eleven years—was spent in collecting and absorbing material. Which meant that things could be explained to me at the institute on the basis of my own experience of life. This is probably what gave a more or less independent slant to my comments on the topics they set us.

I was lucky enough to find myself studying under a very interesting man, a man of profound intellect. A genuine intellectual. Mikhail Ilich Romm, now unfortunately deceased... I shall be grateful to him for the rest of my life.

1954. The entrance examinations for the All-Union Institute of Cinematography. I could have been better prepared, my level of scholarship was less than brilliant, and my general appearance puzzled and perplexed the examination board. As far as I can tell now, I was saved by the composition which they had set me to write before I met the actual lecturer. It was called something like "Please describe the activity in the corridors of the AUIC at the present time". A really exciting subject. I made up for everything else In this piece. Our arguments, our jokes, the things that made us angry—I laid it all out in detail.

And then I met Mikhail Ilich Romm. The other applicants in the corridor drew a terrible picture

of a man whose very glance would reduce you to ashes. But the eyes I encountered were remarkably kind. He started to ask me all about my life, about literature.

The dreaded examination proved to consist of a warm and sincere conversation. Undoubtedly my entire future was decided there and then as we spoke.

True, I still had the selection committee to deal with. They were also clearly astonished at Mikhail Ilich's choice. Even here I stood out as less enlightened and polished than the others. The chairman of the committee asked me ironically:

"Do you know Belinsky?"

"Yes," I said.

"And where does he live now?"

Everyone on the committee fell silent.

"Vissarion Grigorievich? He's dead," I said, and launched into an unnecessary attempt to prove that Belinsky was dead.

All this time Romm listened and said nothing. Above his spectacles those kindly eyes were fixed on me in a slightly ironical smile…

And now I wonder: what was so attractive about him?

Probably the fact that his mind was constantly at work, I could never—I still cannot—imagine him going fishing, for instance, or standing in a queue. I realise that it is possible to think anywhere, but in my memory he is always reasoning and debating. Reasoning aloud, for everyone, or listening, watching—and still reasoning. As you grow older you begin to

understand the strength of a man who is constantly thinking. A strength that is immense, irresistible. Everything passes: youth, charm, passion— everything grows old and decays. Thought remains, and the man who bears it with him throughout his life is beautiful.

In Romm's class we studied more than just directing. Mikhail Ilich required us to try our hand at writing as well. He sent us to certain spots—a post-office or a railway station—and asked us to describe what we saw there. Afterwards he read out our sketches and analysed them. He once gave me a piece of advice: "Keep writing, but don't be in any hurry to send your work to editors, give it to me." Of course, I feel ashamed now for taking up Mikhail Ilich's time. But I set about it with a will, writing pieces and taking them to him. He read them and returned them to me, made his comments and told me to carry on. And then, at the end of the fourth year, or the beginning of the fifth, he said to me: "Send them out at random to all the editors' offices. If your work comes back, send it to someone else next time. That was the way I started." I did as he said. I drew up a list to avoid confusion. The first response was from the journal *Smena.*

Romm supported me in my first steps. But the time came when he said: "Now you're on your own, you're tough enough." It was a moment of joy, and sadness, and great importance. A major turning-point in my life. My life in art was filled with intelligent and kind people.

So far so good. But what about finding my own way as an artist—what was I to write about? Knowing the village, there was nothing else I could write about. I could be daring here, I was as independent as possible. My inexperience might lead me to imitating at first, but nonetheless it seemed to me that I made good progress along my chosen path... And in general I think that I am still following it; that is, the subject of my stories and films is still the village. I feel I would need three lives to say everything about it.

Over its long history the Russian people has selected, preserved and set on a pedestal of respect human qualities which are beyond further revision: honesty, industrious-ness, conscientiousness, kindness... Through all our historical catastrophes we have preserved the great Russian language, our heritage from our fathers and grandfathers... You must believe that it has not all been in vain: our songs, our folk-tales, our incredibly arduous victories, our sufferings... We have lived fully. Never forget that. Or that you are a human being.

...It's rare for me to envy anyone, but I envy my distant ancestors for their persistence and their immense strength. I wouldn't know what to do with that kind of strength nowadays. I can imagine the effort their journey cost them—from the north of Russia, the Volga and the Don eastwards, to the Altai. I can scarcely imagine it, but they actually made that journey. And if we weren't so cautious with fine phrases nowadays, I would say that I bow my head before their

memory, and thank them with all the depth of feeling that my heart can muster: it was they who won my beautiful homeland—for themselves, for us, for those to come after us. The clear skies of my homeland possess a beauty rare on earth. But that is all too easily said: there is a great deal of beauty on the earth, the entire earth is beautiful... It's not a question of beauty, more probably of what our homeland gives each of us for the journey, should we have to follow the opposite route to that followed in ancient times by our ancestors—from the Altai back westwards; in general terms, what his homeland gives a man for the whole of his life. I said that our skies are beautiful but so is our soil, upturned by the plough, so are the people whom I love and remember.

Is it really mine, this homeland, where I was born and grew up? It is. I say it with a sense of profound correctness for I have carried my homeland in my heart all my life, I love it, it is my very life, it gives me strength when times are hard and I am in distress...

My homeland... I have always lived with the feeling that some time I would return to the Altai to stay. I think that perhaps I need to believe in this out of the basic need for security in life: to know that there is always a place to go back to when life becomes unbearable, its fine to live and struggle when there is somewhere to go back to, but it's a different matter when there is nowhere to retreat. I think that the Russian man draws a lot of strength from this feeling that there is somewhere to retreat, somewhere to catch one's

breath and gather one's thoughts. I imagine there is some immense power in the land where I was born, some life-giving force which is capable of restoring the vigour of the blood. Clearly, the vitality and staunchness of spirit that our ancestors brought with them still lives on in the people there, and it is true that a man's native air and native speech, the song he has known since childhood and the gentle voice of his mother are a healing balm to his soul.

I regard the eternal efforts of artists to fathom the working of the human soul as the most modern developments in art. This is noble and difficult work. Counterfeit is almost impossible here, for work which merely imitates investigation is soon exposed by the fact that people have no need of it.

...The philosophy on which my life has been based— for almost forty years now—is the philosophy of courage. So why should I, as a reader and a viewer, deny myself the happiness of looking truth straight in the eye?

Surely I can tell when they are telling me about real life, and when they are trying to deceive me. I'm no politician, I can easily get confused in complicated matters, but as a rank-and-file member of the Communist Party of the USSR, I believe that I belong to a party of action and justice, and as an artist I cannot deceive my people, for instance, by depicting life as always happy.

The truth is sometimes bitter. If I conceal it, if I pretend that everything is fine, everything is wonderful, then in the final analysis I deceive my party too. If its members believe me, instead of thinking carefully and applying their energy to solving the problems they come across, they will remain calm. That's no way to manage things. I want to help the party. I want to show the truth.

Morality is Truth. Not truth with a small "t", but Truth. For it is courage and honesty, it means sharing the joy and pain of our people, thinking the way the people think, because the people always know the Truth.

COUNTRY DWELLERS

> ...So *why not. Mother? Remember your young days. Do come and see us. You'll be able to have a look at Moscow and all that. I'll send the money for the fare. Only you'd better come by air— it'll be cheaper' Drop me a wire right away so that I know when to meet you. Above all, don't get scared.*

Grandma Malanya read this, pursed her withered lips and lapsed into deep thought.

"It's an invitation from Pavel," she said to Shurka, and looked at the lad over her spectacles. Shurka was her grandson. Her daughter had not been able to stick to one husband, and the old lady had persuaded her to place Shurka temporarily in her charge. She was fond of her grandson but kept him under her thumb.

Shurka was doing his homework at the table. In response to his grandmother's statement he merely shrugged—go if you've been invited.

"When do your holidays come round?" Grandma asked sternly.

Shurka pricked up his ears.

"Which holidays? Winter?"

"Did you think I meant summer?"

"First of January. Why?" Grandma again pursed her lips and became thoughtful.

Shurka's heart contracted with joyful anxiety.

"Why?" he repeated.

"Never mind. Get on with your homework." Grandma slipped the letter away into her apron pocket, put on her coat and shawl and left the cottage.

Shurka ran to the window to see where she was going.

At the gate Grandma met a neighbour and started relating her news in a loud voice.

"Pavel's invited me to stay with him in Moscow. I just don't know what to do. Really, I don't. Come and see us, he says. We're missing you badly, that we are."

The neighbour made some inaudible reply but his grandmother's voice came back loudly. "That'd be a good thing, of course. I've never seen my own grandchildren yet, except in a snapshot. It's the journey that worries me, that it does."

Two other women halted as they were going by, then another, and yet another... Soon quite a crowd had gathered round Grandma Malanya and with every new arrival she would begin her story all over again.

"It's Pavel. He's inviting me to Moscow. I just don't know what to do..."

Evidently they were all advising her to go.

Shurka dug his hands into his pockets and started pacing the room. His expression was dreamy, and thoughtful, too, like his grandmother's. On the whole he was very much

like her, just as lean, with high cheekbones and the same small clever eyes. But their characters were quite different. The grandmother was energetic, wiry, loud-voiced and eager to know everything. Shurka, though also of a curious turn of mind, was shy to the point of stupidity, modest, and easily hurt.

That evening they composed a telegram to send to Moscow. Shurka wrote. Grandma dictated.

"My dear son Pasha, if you really want me to come, I can come, of course, although in my old age..."

"Hold on!" said Shurka. "Who writes telegrams like that?"

"How do you think they should be written, then?"

"Will come. Stop. Or perhaps: Will come after New Year. Stop. Mother. That's all."

Grandma was quite offended.

"You've been going to school for six years now, Shurka, and you still haven't any sense. It's about time you learned some!"

This offended Shurka.

"Go ahead then," he said. "Do you know how much it'll come to if you write it like that? About twenty rubles in old money."

Grandma pursed her lips, and thought.

"Very well, then. Write it like this: Dear son, I've been taking some advice from the people round here..."

Shurka put his pen down.

"I can't write such things. Who wants to know you've been asking people's advice? They'll laugh at us at the post-office."

"Write as I tell you!" Grandma commanded. "Do you think I grudge twenty rubles for my own son?"

Shurka took up his pen and with a condescending frown bent over the paper.

"My dear son Pavel, I've had a word with the neighbours here and they all advise me to go. Of course, I feel a bit frightened at my time of life..."

"They'll only rewrite it all at the post-office," Shurka interposed.

"Let them try!"

"You won't know anything about it."

"Go on writing: ...Of course, I feel a bit frightened, but never mind. We'll come after the New Year. Stop. I'll bring Shurka with me. He's a big boy now. And quite obedient too."

Shurka skipped that last bit, about his being a big boy and obedient.

"I shan't feel so frightened if I'm with him. So goodbye for now, son. I miss you right bad myself..."

For "right bad" Shurka wrote "terribly".

"...At least I'll have a chance to see your little ones. Stop. Mother."

"Now let's tot it up," Shurka proclaimed gleefully, and started ticking the words off with his pen and counting in a whisper: "One, two, three, four..."

Grandma stood behind him and waited.

"...Fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty! How's that? Sixty multiplied by thirty makes one thousand

eight hundred? How's that, eh? Divide by a hundred, equals eighteen... Over twenty rubles' worth!" Shurka announced triumphantly.

Grandma took the telegram and put it away in her pocket.

"I'll take it to the post-office myself. You're bound to make it more than it is, you learned man."

"Go ahead. It'll come to just the same. It won't be more than a few kopeks out."

...At about eleven o'clock their neighbour Yegor Lizunov, the supply manager at the village school, came in to see them. Grandma had left a message with his family, asking him to call on her when he came back from work. Yegor had done a lot of travelling in his time. He had even flown.

Yegor took off his coat, then his hat, smoothed down his greying, matted hair with calloused palms and sat down at the table. A smell of hay and harness spread through the room.

"So you want to fly, do you?"

Grandma Malanya went down into the cellar and returned with a large bottle of mead.

"Yes, Yegor. Tell us all about it."

"Well, there's not much to tell, is there?" Yegor's glance was condescending rather than greedy as he watched the old lady filling his glass. "You just go to town, get on the Biisk-Tomsk train as far as Novosibirsk, and then ask where the air terminal is. Or mebbe you can go straight from the station to the airport..."

"Just a minute! You and your 'mebbes'. You tell me what to do. Don't 'mebby' me. And not so fast. Don't throw it at me all at once." Grandma placed the glass of mead in front of Yegor and eyed him severely.

Yegor fondled the glass.

"Well, when you arrive in Novosibirsk the first thing you do is ask how to get to the airport. Remember that, Shurka."

"Make a note of it, Shurka," Grandma commanded.

Shurka tore a sheet out of his exercise book and started taking notes.

"When you get to Tolmachovo you'll have to ask again where they sell tickets for Moscow. Then you buy your tickets, get on a TU-104 and in five hours you'll be in Moscow, the capital of our Motherland."

The old lady propped her head on her small withered fist and listened to Yegor in dismay. The more he talked and the easier the journey seemed to him, the more worried the old lady's face became.

"In Sverdlovsk, though, you'll make a stop..."

"What for?"

"You'll have to, that's all. No one's going to ask your opinion. They'll just land you and that's that." Yegor decided it was time he had a drink. "Well?.. Here's to an easy journey!"

"Not so fast, man. Do we have to ask them to land us in Sverdlovsk, or do they land everybody?"

Yegor drank deep, smacked his lips with relish, and stroked down his moustache.

"Everybody. Right good mead this is of yours, Malanya Vasilyevna. How do you make it? I wish you'd tell my old woman."

Grandma poured him another glass.

"When you stop being so mean, you'll start making good mead."

"How come?" Yegor was puzzled.

"Put more sugar in it. You always want something on the cheap, you do. Put more sugar in your brew, then it'll be worth drinking. It's a crying shame to strengthen it with tobacco the way you do."

"Aye," Yegor said thoughtfully. He lifted his glass, looked at the old dame, then at Shurka, and drank. "Aye," he repeated. "That's all very well. But when you're in Novosibirsk, you'd better mind you don't slip up."

"Why?"

"Well, you know, anything might happen." Yegor took out his pouch, made a cigarette, lit it and blew out a huge cloud of white smoke from under his moustache. "The main thing, when you get to Tolmachovo, o'course, is not to mix up the ticket desks. Or you might find yourself flying to Vladivostok."

Grandma Malanya rose uneasily and filled Yegor's glass for the third time.

Yegor drank it at once, smacked his lips and set about enlarging on his idea.

"Some people, you know, they just come up to the desk and ask for a ticket. Where that ticket is to take them, they don't say. So they find themselves flying in quite the opposite direction. So, as I says, mind your step."

Grandma poured Yegor a fourth glass. Yegor became quite relaxed and fell into a talking mood.

"When you're flying in a plane, you need nerves of steel! Up it goes, and the first thing they do is give you a sweet..."

"A sweet?"

"O'course. That's as much as to say, forget everything. Never mind what happens... But as a matter of fact, that's the most dangerous moment of all. Or else, let's say, they'll tell you, 'Fasten your seatbelts.' 'But why?' you say. That's the regulations/ Regulations-huh! What they mean is we might come a cropper, that's what they mean! But they call it regulations."

"Heavens above!" the old lady exclaimed. "Why fly in the thing if that's what..."

"There's a saying, isn't there, if you're afraid of the wolf don't go into the forest." Yegor glanced at the bottle. "The jets, o'course, they're a bit more reliable. The ones with a propeller, they may break down at any moment— and there you are... And besides, they often catch fire, these engines. I was flying once from Vladivostok..." Yegor settled himself more comfortably on his chair, lighted a fresh cigarette and again looked at the bottle. Grandma never stirred. "There we were, flying along, and I happened to look out of window—all aflame!"

"God preserve us!" Grandma exclaimed.

Shurka was listening open-mouthed.

"Aye. So of course, I hollered out. One of the pilots comes running up... Still, it wasn't so bad, he just bawled at me, that's all. 'What are you

starting a panic for?' he says. 'Yes, it's burning all right, but you needn't worry, just sit where you are...' That's the way they run things in that air force of theirs."

To Shurka this seemed quite unbelievable. He had expected to hear that at the sight of the flames the pilot had tried to shake them off by increasing speed, or else made a forced landing, but instead he had just given Yegor a telling-off.

"There's one thing I can't understand," Yegor continued, addressing Shurka. "Why don't they give the passengers parachutes?"

Shurka shrugged. He had not been aware that passengers were not given parachutes. This was strange, too, if it was really so.

Yegor stubbed out his cigarette in a flower-pot, half rose and filled his glass from the bottle.

"This is some mead, Malanya!"

"Don't overdo it—it'll make you drunk."

"Wonderful stuff..." Yegor shook his head and drank.

"Ah! But the jets, they're dangerous too. If something goes wrong with one of them, down it goes like a chopper. Instantaneous that is—nothing left to pick up afterwards. Three hundred grammes per person counting his clothes." Yegor frowned and directed an attentive glance at the bottle. Grandma picked it up and carried it out into the passage. Yegor sat on for a little longer, then got up to go. He was swaying slightly.

"Still, there's nothing to be afraid of really!" he said loudly. "But keep as far as you can from the pilot's cabin.

Stay right back in the tail, then you'll be all right. Well, I'm off..."

He strode heavily to the door and put on his hat and coat.

"Regards to Pavel Sergeyevich from me. That's some mead of yours, Malanya!"

Grandma was annoyed that Yegor had so quickly made himself tipsy-it hadn't been a proper talk.

"Your head isn't what it used to be, Yegor."

"I'm tired, that's why." Yegor picked a wisp of straw off the collar of his coat. "I told them officials of ours the hay ought to be carted in summer. No, they wouldn't! Now after that snow-storm all the roads are snowed up. We've been hauling and tugging all day and we could hardly get through to the nearest stacks. And now that mead of yours..." Yegor shook his head and chuckled. "Well, I'm off. You go by air-nothing to be scared of really. Just keep away from that pilot's cabin. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," Shurka said.

The door closed behind him; they heard him stepping down carefully from the high porch, and then crossing the yard. The gate creaked and in the street he struck up not very loudly with a song about the wide and rolling sea, only to break off again rather suddenly.

Grandma Malanya stared at the darkened window in dismay. Shurka read over what he had taken down of Yegor's remarks.

"I'm afraid to fly, Shurka," said Grandma.

"Other people fly."

"Wouldn't it be better to go by train?"

"That means all my holidays will be wasted travelling."

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure!" Grandma sighed. "Let's write Pavel a letter, and we'll canceilate the telegram."

Shurka tore yet another sheet out of his exercise book.

"So we're not flying?"

"Fly! But it's such a terrible ordeal, that flying is. Goodness me! Nothing left but three hundred grammes..."

Shurka was deep in thought.

"Write this: Dear son Pavel, I've had a word with some knowledgeable folk around here..."

Shurka bent over the paper.

"They've told us about this flying business... And Shurka and I, we've decided to come in summer by train. We could have come now, but Shurka's holiday's only a short one..."

Shurka hesitated for a second or two and went on writing:

"And now, Uncle Pavel, I'm writing to you myself. Granny's been frightened by Uncle Yegor Lizunov, our supply manager, if you remember him. For example, he told us the following. He looked out of the window and saw the engine was on fire, so he informed the pilot about it and the pilot just ticked him off. I think that if the engine really was on fire, the pilot would have tried to shake off the flames by speed, as they usually do. I can only assume that Uncle Yegor saw flames from the exhaust and started a panic. Will you, please, write and tell Granny it's nothing to be afraid of, but don't mention to her what I wrote.

Or else she won't travel even in summer. There'll be the vegetable garden to look after, the pigs, the hens and geese and all that—she'll never leave them. You see, we are still country dwellers. But I'd just love to see Moscow. We do it at school in geography and history, but that's not the same thing, you know. And another thing Uncle Yegor said was that the passengers are not given parachutes. That's sheer blackmail. But Granny believes it. Please, Uncle Pavel, make her ashamed of herself. She loves you so much. So you write to her something like this. What do you mean by it, mother? Your own son's a pilot. Hero of the Soviet Union, with many decorations, and you're afraid to fly in a passenger plane that's safe as houses! At a time when we have smashed the sound barrier. Write that to her and she'll be on that plane in no time. She's very proud of you. And quite justifiably so, of course. I'm proud of you too. And I'm just longing to see Moscow. Well, good-bye for now. Greetings, Alexander."

And meanwhile Grandma was dictating to him:

"...We'll come a bit later on, towards autumn. The mushrooms will be in by then. I could bring you some pickled mushrooms, make some buckthorn jam for you. In Moscow it's all shop-made stuff, I know. They can't make it like I make it at home. So that's how things are, dear. Give my love to your wife and the children and love from Shurka too. All for now... Have you got that all down, Shurka?"

"Yes, I have."

Grandma took the sheet, folded it and put it in an envelope and herself wrote the address:

"Moscow, 78 Leninsky Prospekt, flat 156. To Hero of the Soviet Union Lyubavin, Pavel Ignatyevich from his mother, in Siberia."

She always wrote the address herself because she knew it would be more sure of getting there if she wrote it.

"Well, that's that. Don't fret, Shurka. We'll go in summer."

"I'm not fretting. But you'd better do a bit of packing now and then. You might suddenly change your mind and decide to fly."

Grandma looked at her grandson and said nothing.

That night Shurka heard her shifting about restlessly on her bed over the big Russian stove, sighing quietly to herself and muttering.

Shurka could not sleep either. He was thinking. The very near future promised many wonderful surprises. Adventures he had never dreamed of before.

"Shurka!" his grandmother called.

"What is it?"

"I expect they let Pavel into the Kremlin, don't they?"

"I expect so. What of it?"

"Fancy going inside there, just for once, and looking round."

"They let everyone in nowadays."

Grandma was silent for a while.

"Tell me another!" she said.

"Nikolai Vasilyevich told us so."

They were both silent for a minute or two.

"You're pretty brave, Granny, in the ordinary way, and now you're scared," Shurka said disapprovingly. "What are you so scared of?"

"You go to sleep," Grandma commanded. "You're a real dare-devil, aren't you? You'd be the first to do it in ó our trousers."

"Want a bet that I wouldn't be scared?"

"Go to sleep, boy. You'll never wake up in time for school tomorrow."

Shurka fell quietly asleep.

STEPAN IN LOVE

One spring day, in April, Stepan Yemelyanov fell in love. With Ellochka, a girl who had come out to Siberia on the virgin lands scheme. He had seen her only twice. The first time was when he had given her a lift from town to the village. Nothing special, he had thought at the time. They didn't exchange a word. The lorry jolted along over the pot-holes and, whenever the girl was thrown against Stepan, she looked at him in embarrassment, as much as to say, "You know perfectly well I didn't mean to do that." Whereupon she would move to the other end of the seat. Stepan couldn't have cared less. He didn't even look at the girl, just whistled *Amur Waves* to himself and thought about his battery (it was flat).

When they arrived in the village, the girl started fumbling in her bag for money.

Stepan grew slightly red around the cheek-bones.

"Forget it."

"But why?" The girl glanced up at him with greenish, transparent eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Never mind." Stepan whammed into gear, put his foot down and drove off.

Some girls are pretty good-lookers, he reflected for a moment, with his passenger in mind. And that was all. He forgot about her.

After that he was away for a few weeks on the rough Altai roads. He spent the night where he could, saw other girls, some beautiful, others not so beautiful-all kinds. Plenty of girls in the world! If you thought about them all, it'd give you a headache.

Then came April.

One Saturday Stepan drove home in his lorry. He gave himself a good steaming in the bath-house, rigged himself out in a clean shirt with an embroidered collar, and new, soft-leather boots, drank a mug of strong mead and went to the village club to see the show.

It was the local drama group that was playing that night. Stepan enjoyed seeing his own folk on the stage. It was great. You might have known a man for years, then you came to the club and there he was, running about the stage with a beard down to his waist and shouting in an awful voice, "I'll have you buried alive, you so-and-so!"

Stepan always roared with laughter at such moments and the people next to him would always hiss at him and say he didn't understand what it was all about.

Stepan took a seat in one of the front rows and settled down to watch. And what did he see? That very girl he had given a lift from town was on the stage. Just as beautiful as ever, but calm and very important-looking somehow, with her head tilted back a little, her light-brown braids falling down over her shoulders, and red boots on her feet. She walked slowly and turned her head slowly, but there was something soft and endearing in her voice. Stepan began to feel roused. He had

recognised her at once. But he had never thought she was so beautiful as this, that is, he had known she was beautiful, but not in this way.

Then a cocky fellow, Vaska Semyonov, the collecitve farm's bookkeeper, appeared on the stage in a hat and spectacles, also very important-looking. At any other time Stepan would have burst out laughing at the sight of him, but he didn't feel like laughing just now. He watched the girl, waiting for what would happen between her and Vaska. He saw her eyes brighten, saw her cringe as though she were afraid of something. It made him feel quite sorry for her.

"Why have you come?" she asked.

"I can't live without you!" that fool declared loudly, so loud that everyone in the hall could hear.

"Go away," the girl said, but in such a way that it sounded more like, "Don't go away."

"I won't go," Vaska declared, and moved closer to her.

Stepan gripped the edge of the bench. He knew this Vaska was not the kind to go as easy as that. And before he could bat an eyelid, before he had figured out how all this would end, the bookkeeper expertly put his arms round the girl's shoulders, tilted her on to his left arm and kissed her. Stepan saw the girl's lips after the kiss—a little swollen, moist and slightly parted. They were quivering in a demure, happy smile. Everything went dark before Stepan's eyes. He rose and left the club.

Outside he leaned against a post and was a long time coming to his senses.

"What's it all mean?"' he muttered.

...For three days Stepan went about in a fine state (his lorry was in for repair). He found out that the girl's name was Ella, that she was from the city of Voronezh, and that she was the timekeeper in a tractor team. And that was all. He thought of having a word with Vaska Semyonov to make sure he didn't take matters too far on the stage. But he thought better of it in time. After all, it wasn't real life on stage. He'd make a laughing-stock of himself.

One evening Stepan put a terrific shine on his soft-leather boots and set out—to see Ellochka. He got as far as the gate (she was lodging with an old couple, the Kuksins), hung about for a while, then walked away. He roamed aimlessly out of the village, and ended up by the river, sitting on the damp ground. He wrapped his arms round his knees, sank his head on them and sat like that until dawn, thinking.

He lost weight in those few days and his eyes darkened with misery. He ate hardly anything and did nothing but smoke and think...

"What's the matter, boy?" his father asked.

"Nothing..." Stepan crushed one cigarette-butt under his boot and reached for another cigarette. He kept his eyes averted.

He had not seen Ellochka in all this time. He went no more to the club.

On the fourth day Stepan announced to his father, "I want to get married."

"Well? Who to?" Yegor Severyanich, his father, asked with interest.

"That one ... the new girl ... the timekeeper," Stepan replied quietly, frowning past his father at the window.

Yegor looked thoughtful.

"D'you know her at all?"

"Yes..." Stepan hesitated. "Well, er... no."

"Then you won't catch me doing any matchmaking," Yegor declared firmly.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to be put to shame in my old age. I know what it's like. You come to the house and the girl doesn't know a thing about it. You had better talk to her first yourself. Go out courting for a bit, like other people do; then we'll make a match for you. Otherwise... You're always like that, Stepan, going at things like a bull at a gate. I've tried to teach you, but it's no good."

Grandad Severyan, Yegor's father, overheard this conversation. He was lying on the bed over the stove, out of sorts.

"Listen to the great man! He's not going to do any matchmaking," Grandad exclaimed crossly. "Have ye forgotten how I went around persuading your bride for ye?"

Yegor frowned and lit a cigarette. There was a long pause. What could he say? As a young man he had been the same as Stepan—afraid to look a lass in the eye.

"Well, I could go, of course," he said, "only ... only I reckon she won't marry you anyway."

"Yes, she will!" Grandad Severyan declared. "Any girl'd marry a lad like him."

"What makes you think she won't marry me?" Stepan asked, feeling a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"She's a town girl ... the devil knows what they want. She'll be telling you you're backward."

"You're backward yourself," Grandad Severyan interrupted again. "No one takes any notice o'that nowadays. They're a lot cleverer, the girls of today. I'm an old man and even I know that."

On the following Thursday, first thing in the morning, father and son were getting ready for their expedition.

Stepan again donned his embroidered shirt and spent a long time in front of the glass, smoothing down his straight, stiff hair.

Yegor with a tortured expression on his face was struggling to capture the small slippery button on the fly of his new trousers. Eventually he caught it in his gnarled fingers and started working it into the tight buttonhole.

"The way they make things, the clowns," he cursed. "You can bust yourself, but you won't button it. Bust yourself in two!"

Stepan finished combing his hair and stood in the middle of the room, wondering what else to do about his appearance.

"Put on a tie," Grandad Severyan advised.

"It wouldn't go with an embroidered shirt," Stepan explained.

At last they were ready.

Yegor pressed his huge palm to the back of his head and stared perplexedly at the old man.

"Do we take a bottle with us or not? Things are done different these days. You can't be sure of anything."

The old man pondered.

"Take one in your pocket," he advised. "Then you'll have it if it's needed."

They set off.

It was a sunny, tinkling day. Little torrents were flowing everywhere. The sky was reflected in the puddles; blue splinters of it glittered here and there on the black earth. April was in full swing on the roads.

They walked in silence, carefully making their way round the puddles to keep their boots clean.

The Kuksins lived in a big house they had built themselves. The first two rooms were empty. Yegor's heart sank; he had been counting on having a word with old Kuksin first, and in the course of the conversation popping in a "There's a little matter we came here about..." Old Kuksin would have been sure to help him. But now they would have to go straight to the best room, where Ella lived.

Father and son exchanged glances and headed for the best room.

Yegor tapped cautiously on the door with one knuckle.

"Come in!" came the response.

Stepan's heart jumped painfully.

Yegor opened one leaf of the door a little, and squeezed in. Stepan followed him. They both halted in the doorway.

At the table in front of them sat Vaska Semyonov and next to him, *right* next to him, sat Ellochka.

They were drinking tea. Vaska had taken off his jacket and was sitting there in a yellow silk shirt, his perfectly shaven cheeks positively glowing. He looked as if he were in his own home, quite at ease, almost lounging. He surveyed the Yemelyanovs affectionately and stupidly.

Ellochka rose lightly and moved up two chairs for the visitors.

"Do come in, please. Come in and sit down."

Yegor, staring at Vaska, seated himself, then looked round at his son. Stepan's cheeks were flaming. He seemed to be rooted to the floor.

"Take a seat, what are you standing for!" Ellochka exclaimed merrily, "Haven't you ever met before?"

Stepan sat down and placed his cap on his knee.

For a time there was silence.

Ellochka, ready to burst out laughing, glanced now at Stepan, now at Yegor, now at Vaska. Vaska was also puzzled.

"What can I do for you, comrades? I remember you," Ellochka said gaily, addressing Stepan.

"You gave me a lift back from town. You were very cross then."

Stepan gave her an agonised smile.

Vaska took it upon himself to amuse the company with a joke.

"So we pick up a few passengers on the quiet, do we, Stepan Yegorich? That's not very nice..."

Yegor glanced again at Vaska's sleek face, lowered his head like a bull, and said straight out, "We're here to make a match."

Ellochka actually opened her mouth in surprise.

"But how?.."

"How! How do they make a match? Here's my son," Yegor nodded towards Stepan. "He wants you to marry him. If you consent, of course."

Ella glanced at Stepan.

He clenched his fists till they turned white, planted them on his knees and studied them attentively. Tiny beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. He made no attempt to wipe them off.

"Marry?" Ella asked, and flushed.

"What else?" Stepan breathed a sigh, and stared at Vaska. Vaska gave a giggle, and swivelled round on his chair to stare at Ella. She stood by the table, pink with embarrassment, carefully removing a piece of fluff from her dress with her white slim fingers.

"You thought of it too late, Stepan," Vaska proclaimed loudly and swivelled round again. "You're too late."

Stepan never gave him so much as a glance this time and fixed his eyes on the girl with a look of serious expectation.

He waited. His confusion had passed off for some reason.

Ellochka suddenly raised her head and looked at Stepan with her clear greenish eyes. There was modesty, affection, reproach, approval and something else, inexpressibly appealing, timid,

desperate in that glance. Stepan's heart bounded with joy. No one could have explained what it was that had been born between them at that moment, or why it was born. Only they understood that, or rather felt it.

At that very moment Vaska blurted out, "We're getting married soon, Stepan."

It sounded so foolish that he himself realised he shouldn't have said it.

Yegor rose and was about to walk out of the room, but Ellochka suddenly got into a flutter and said almost too hurriedly, "Where are you going? Call yourself a matchmaker! I haven't given you any answer yet."

She quickly recovered her poise and turned her eyes away from Stepan, but Stepan... It didn't matter to Stepan whether she was looking at him or not. He was burning with shame and joy. No force on earth could have made him get up and leave.

Yegor halted. By now Vaska was red with confusion. He, too, had begun to guess the truth.

"Sit down. Let's have some tea, shall we?"

Ella had been confused at first, but now she spoke with assurance and rather a different kind of gaiety—a resolute gaiety.

Everyone waited in suspense for what was bound to happen.

"Perhaps I'd better go?" Vaska asked loudly, and his voice shook with disappointment. Vaska was going under, quite simply going under. He didn't even try to save himself.

"Perhaps you should," Stepan also spoke loudly. He was a little too quick. He shouldn't

have hurried like that. But it couldn't be helped. There were two of them and one had to go. Both were playing it rough, and one of them alone was to receive Ella's pardon.

This time it was Vaska who ignored Stepan and stared straight at Ella. Ella blushed again and looked at Yegor, who was still standing in the middle of the room and shifting his glance from one to the other and then to the third. He was completely baffled. Ella gave a sad little laugh.

"What a situation to be in! If only someone could help... Why are you standing like this? Please sit down!"

She actually stamped her foot lightly. It was certainly hard for her.

Vaska rose from his chair and started putting on his jacket. He put it on very slowly somehow. Everyone waited for him to get it on.

"Well, Stepan, I'm sorry for you," Vaska said.

And he walked out of the room. At the door he looked round, gave everyone a gay, malicious glance and walked out, slamming the door behind him.

For a time there was silence in the room.

Stepan carefully wiped the sweat off his forehead, and smiled.

"Well, I don't know about anybody else, but I'm going to have a stiff drink," Yegor declared, going to the table. "I feel quite weak after this here matchmaking, I do."

ALL ALONE

The qualities harness-maker Antip Kalachikov respected most in people were sensitivity and kindness. In those moments when a good mood came over him and relative peace descended upon his household, Antip would say affectionately to his wife:

"Marfa, you're a big woman, God knows, but you're about as useless as they come."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because all you want me to do is sew and sew, day in and day out. But I'm one of the good Lord's creatures, the same as you. And all of us have got a soul. Sometimes, my soul needs to play around just like everybody else's."

"I don't give a tinker's dam about that soul of yours."

"Ah-h..."

"'Ah-h' yourself. What's that you're belly-aching about?"

"Well... I was just remembering that pa of yours, rich kulak bastard that he was, may he rest in peace."

Big stern Marfa put her hands on her hips and looked sternly up at Antip. But her small, wiry husband firmly bore up under that fiery gaze.

"You just leave my pa out of this, you hear?"

"Yeah, I hear..." Antip replied tersely.

"Well, see that you do."

"You sure are a mean one, Marfa. You oughtn't to be so mean, dear. Otherwise, you'll get a heart attack and die, sure as I'm sitting here."

In the forty years she had lived with Antip, Marfa had never been able to figure out when he was joking and when he was serious.

"Shut your trap and keep sewing."

"I'm sewing, ma, I'm sewing my weary fingers to the bone."

The Kalachikovs' home reeked of the ineradicable, pungent smells of leather, pitch, and tar. Once the big sunny house had been filled with the laughter of children. Then had come the weddings and feasting. Nor had the house been spared the mournful night hours of unnatural silence when the mirror was draped in black and the faint illumination of wax candles—pale and weak—shed a tiny bit of light on the profound mystery of death. A lot had happened under that roof. Antip Kalachikov and his mighty better half had reared twelve of their offspring, but there had been eighteen in all.

The appearance of the house had altered over the years, but the one thing that never changed was the corner where Antip worked. It was behind the partition to the right of the big Russian stove. There Antip made harnesses, bridles, saddles, and horse-collars. And there on the wall hung his cherished balalaika. It was Antip's passion—his deep but silent love of all life—the balalaika. The harness-maker could play it for hours on end with his head tilted in the manner of balalaika-players. And it wasn't clear whether the instrument was passing on to him

some priceless knowledge he had long forgotten, or whether he was voicing to it the unhurried ruminations of an old man. He would have sat there playing the whole day through if it weren't for the vigilant Marfa. For the truth of the matter was, Marfa really did want him to sew and sew, day in and day out, since money was her passion, and she watched every kopeck. She had been doing battle with Antip's balalaika all her life. Once it got to the point that she tossed the hated balalaika into the fire. Antip stood there, pale as a ghost, watching it burn. The instrument caught fire at once like a paper-thin strip of birch-bark. It started to warp... Three times it moaned in an almost human voice—the strings snapped—and it died. Antip went outside, took the ax, and chopped to bits all the half-finished horse-collars and all the harnesses, bridles, and saddles there were. He chopped in total silence and with frightening neatness, placing each object of his wrath on the bench, then letting fly the ax. His actions gave Marfa such a fright, she didn't dare say a word. After that, Antip drank for a solid week, not coming home at all. Finally, he returned, hung a new balalaika on the wall, and got down to work again. Marfa never touched his balalaika after that. But she kept close watch over Antip, never spending too much time at the neighbors and trying not to leave the house. For she knew that as soon as she stepped out, he would take down the balalaika and start to play. And that would be the end of his harness-making until she returned.

One fall evening, it happened that the two of them were sitting all alone—Antip in his corner and Marfa at the table with her knitting.

Neither said a word.

Though it was slushy out and a cold rain was falling, inside the house it was cozy and warm. Antip was hammering bronze tacks into a horse-collar: Tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap-tap...

Marfa put down her knitting and stared out the window, lost in thought. "Tap-tap, tap-tap," came the noises from Antip's corner. The clock on the wall was ticking erratically, and it seemed it would stop any minute, but it didn't.

Raindrops tapped gently and dully on the windowpane.

"What's making you so sad, Marfa dear?" asked Antip. "Are you thinking how to save up more money with an old lazybones like me for a husband?"

Marfa didn't reply, but kept staring out the window. Antip gazed at her.

"Neither one of us is long for this world, no matter how hard you think. So like it or not, a hundred roubles more or less isn't worth worrying about," Antip went on.

He liked to chew the fat while he was working. "Take me for instance. I've been athinkin' all my life, and it never got me anything but hemorrhoids. I worked my fingers to the bone! But what have I ever seen that was worth seeing? Not a thing! How many battles have there been in my lifetime—how many different uprisings. There was the Civil War and the Second World War. A lot of people died, but at least they died

heroically. I sat down to work in 1913, and I've been sitting here ever since. Soon I'll be seventy—imagine that! What a patient feller I've turned out to be. Now I wonder what I've been aworkin' for all these long years. I never cared much for money—never was the greedy type. I never amounted to much of anything, and soon, no one will have any use for the work I do. Who needs a harness-maker these days, what with tractors and harvesters and the like? It kind of makes me wonder why I was ever born and why I lived."

"For the children's sake," Marfa replied in all seriousness.

Antip hadn't expected her to join in the conversation. She generally interrupted him with some insulting comment or other.

"For the children's sake?" Antip inquired with a sudden surge of interest. "Well, I suppose that's right, on the one hand. But on the other, it's not. It's not right at all."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It's not right to live just for your children's sake. You have to live for yourself a bit, too."

"So what was it that you wanted to do for yourself and didn't?"

Antip didn't know how to answer that question right off.

"What do you mean 'what'? I would have found something to do. Maybe I'd have been a musician. After all, that feller came from the city that time and said I was a natural-born musician. And anyone with natural-born talent is worth their weight in gold. It's a rare thing, talent. But what

am I now? Nothing but an ordinary harness-maker. Just think, Marfa, I might have been..."

"Stop talking nonsense!..." snapped Marfa with a wave of her hand. "It's downright disgusting to hear you carrying on like that."

"You just don't understand," said Antip with a sigh.

Another spell of silence followed.

Suddenly, Marfa burst out crying. As she wiped her tears with her handkerchief, she said:

"Our kids have scattered to the four corners of the earth, and now we're all alone."

"So what did you want them to do—sit by your side to keep you company your whole life through?" inquired Antip.

"Enough of that blessed tapping for now!" Marfa exclaimed. "Let's sit and talk about the kids for a while."

Antip put down his hammer with a grin.

"You're getting soft in your old age, Marfa!" he said with a twinkle in his eye. "If you want, I'll play you a little tune to chase the blues away."

"Go ahead," she assented.

So Antip washed his face and hands, then combed his hair.

"Give me my new shirt."

Marfa took his new shirt from the chest, and Antip donned it, belting it at the waist. He took the balalaika from the wall, sat in the best-lit corner of the room by the icons, and looked at Marfa...

"Let's start our little concert."

"Just don't you start jabbering," Marfa offered her counsel.

"Now we'll recall all the years of our youth," Antip bragged as he tuned the instrument. "Do you remember the round dances out in the meadows?"

"Of course I do! How could I forget? I'm a few years younger than you, after all."

"By how much? A good three weeks if it's a day..."

"Not three weeks, but two full years. I was practically a child then, but you were already wild as they come."

Antip laughed good-naturedly.

"I was a dapper feller sure as I'm sitting here! Do you remember how you came chasing after me?!"

"Me? Chasing after you? Heaven forbid! Who was it my pa, may he rest in peace, had to set the dogs on?! And who was it that left a piece of his britches hanging on our fence?"

"It was me, I reckon..."

Antip turned the last peg, tilted his head to one side, and strummed softly... He started to play, and the bright music of their distant youth poured into the warmth of the empty cottage where twilight was thickening. They remembered other evenings and were filled with joy and sadness in turn. They thought about what the main thing in life was but couldn't quite figure it out.

"Mama, dear, don't make me A sa-ra-fa-a-an of red,"

Antip began to sing softly, and Marfa nodded. She joined in:

"Don't waste time on baubles, dear.
You'll only lose your head..."

They didn't always sing in tune, but still, it did them both a lot of good. Long-forgotten pictures from the past flashed through their minds: the steppe that stretched on forever beyond their native village, the riverbanks, and the dark, rustling poplar grove that was a little bit scary... There was a sweet thrill about it all. The gloomy fall, their solitude, money, and horse-collars all vanished for a while.

Next, Antip struck up a merry tune. He hopped about the cottage like an imp, playfully swaying his bony hips.

"Hey there, boom-hoot-toot,
All my little hooter-footers.
Come on over and have a ball.
Sing and dance until you fall."

Antip was touchingly amusing in his merry-making.

When he began to hop about, Marfa started laughing, then burst into tears. But she wiped her eyes immediately and started laughing again.

"Stop kidding around, for God's sake. Nothing but skin and bones, but he has to play the fool anyway!"

Antip was glowing with pleasure. His tiny, clever eyes twinkled with merriment.

"Oh Marfa mine, Marfa darling.
There's really no sense scolding!"

"Hey, Antip, do you remember how you took me to the fair in the big city that time?" Antip nodded and continued:

"Oh how well I remember,
I remember,
Marfa, dear, :
What a merry time we had.
Lentil soup and lots of beer! "

"You fool, Antip!" Marfa said tenderly. "The devil knows what you'll think up next."

"Oh Marfa, my little dear.
You fill our land with lots of cheer..."

Marfa was rolling with laughter by the time.

"If you aren't the silliest thing I ever saw, Antip!"

"Hey there, boom-hoot-toot.
All my little hooter-tootersi"

"Sit down, for goodness sake, and we'll sing something else," said Marfa, wiping her tears.

Antip was panting slightly... He looked at Marfa with a smile.

"See there! And to think you said your Antip was a bad sort!"

"Not bad—just a bit of a clown, that's all," Marfa corrected him.

"That means you don't understand," said Antip, not offended in the least by her pronouncement. He sat down and continued: "We could have had a fine life together, you and I! We could have been the best of friends. But you were always worried about money. Don't get mad, mind you."

"I wasn't worried about money, but about the lack of it—that's what worried me. We never seemed to have any money."

"We would have had enough, and that's the honest truth. But we won't talk about that now. What melody do you desire to hear, Mademoiselle Frau?"

"The one about Brave Volodya."

"That's too sad, the devil take it. What about another one?"

"I don't mind. I'll have a good cry at least."

"Oh, seagulls, don't circle above this deep sea," Antip began,

"Poor things, there's nowhere to land.
But fly instead to Siberia dread,
With sad news for a lass dear to me."

Antip crooned with overwhelming feeling. It was almost as if he were speaking instead of singing.

"A t twelve o'clock on a pitch black night.
They killed our Brave Volodya.
Next morning his father and youngest son..."

By that time, Marfa was sobbing.

"Antip, listen. Antip!.. Forgive me if I ever did wrong by you," she pleaded through her tears.

"Never mind," said Antip. "And you forgive me, too, if I've been in the wrong about things."

"I never let you play your balalaika..."

"Never mind," Antip said again. "If you were to let me, I'd play day and night. And I know that's not right either."

"We can buy a little bottle for you if you like."

"I won't say no," Antip agreed.

Marfa wiped her eyes and rose.

"Then you get on off to the store, and I'll fix us some supper."

Antip pulled on his rude slicker and stood in the middle of the room waiting for Marfa to fish the money out of an enormous trunk where it was hidden under a pile of clothing. He stood there looking at her broad back.

"There's one more thing," he began with all the casual-ness he could muster. "This one's old already. I need a new one. And yesterday, they got in a whole shipment at the store. Good ones! Why don't I go ahead and buy one while I'm there?"

"One what?" Marfa asked, her broad back motionless for the moment.

"A new balalaika."

Marfa began to move again. She got the money out, sat down on the trunk, and began to count it, slowly and with great difficulty. Her lips moved silently as she frowned furiously.

"But that one still plays just fine," she objected.

"The sound box is cracked, and it... It buzzes whenever I play."

"So why don't you glue it back together? All it needs is a bit of pitch, and it'll be good as new."

"How in the name of God can I use pitch on a balalaika? Have you lost your feeble mind?"

Marfa didn't say anything in reply. She counted the money again with a stern, troubled expression on her face.

"Here," she said, handing Antip the money without looking him in the eye.

"But this is only enough for the vodka," Antip said sadly, his lower lip poking out in disappointment.

"Don't worry, that one still plays. Just look how nice it played today."

"Ah-h, Marfa!.." Antip sighed loudly.

"What do you mean, 'Ah-h, Marfa'? Don't you 'Ah, Marfa'me!"

"Well, I guess I'll be on my way," Antip said with resignation, turning and heading for the door.

"How much does it cost?" Marfa suddenly asked sternly.

"Not much. Not much at all!" Antip said, stopping at the threshold. "Six roubles. That's all."

"Here," snapped Marfa, angrily holding out the six roubles.

Antip walked hurriedly over to his wife, took the money, and left in silence: it would have been risky to talk with her or be too slow about going, for Marfa could easily change her mind.

OUTER SPACE, THE NERVOUS SYSTEM AND A SLAB OF FATBACK

Old Naum Yevstigneich had a terrible hangover. He was lying on the stove-bed, groaning.

Regularly, once a month, when he drew his pension, Yevstigneich used to get drunk, after which he would be laid up for three days at a stretch. "They're kicking me with their hooves, all the devils in hell are kicking me, I'm giving up the ghost..."

Fifteen-year-old Yurka, his lodger, was sitting at the table with books spread all over it, doing his homework.

"I'm giving up the ghost, Yurka..."

"You shouldn't have drunk so much."

"You're too young to talk like that."

A pause. Yurka's pen went on scratching.

But the old man wanted to talk—it gave him some relief.

"What else am I to do if I don't drink! Must do something to mark the month."

"Why?"

"I'm a human being, ain't I?"

"Hm... You talk as if you were living in the time of serfdom," Yurka leaned back on his bent-wood chair and eyed his landlord scornfully. "In those days they used to believe that everyone ought to drink."

"How do you know what it was like in those days?" The old man looked down from above with a grimace of pain and curiosity. Yurka sometimes surprised him with his knowledge and, though he never gave in, he liked listening to the lad. "How d'you know? You're only a stripling."

"We've been through that period."

"Your teachers told you about it, did they?"

"Yes, they did."

"How do *they* know? There's not an old man among 'em."

"From books."

"From books... They don't happen to know why a man's sick on the morning after, do they?"

"Intoxication of the organism by fusel oil."

"Oil?! In vodka?"

"Yes."

Yevstigneich felt very ill, but he couldn't help uttering a croaky laugh.

"That's where study gets you."

"D'you want me to show you the formula? I'll prove it to you in black and white right now..." Yurka picked up a chemistry textbook, but the old man gave a groan and clutched his head.

"Oo-oh!.. It's coming over me again! Now I'm done for..."

'Take a hair of the dog that bit you then! Why suffer like this?"

The old man made no response to this suggestion. He could have done with another drink to sober up with, but he grudged the money. On the whole, he was a stingy old blighter. He lived well enough, drew a decent pension and his sons and daughter in town

helped him out. His cellar was stocked with all kinds of provisions—fatback that he had salted down the year before, pickled cucumbers, cabbage, water melons, mushrooms... It was like a regular food store with its vats, tubs, baskets and barrels. In his larder he had a sack and a half of good flour and a leg of ham weighing about fifty pounds. In his vegetable garden there was a potato clamp, last year's but still not used up, from which he was feeding his pigs, ducks and chickens.

When he wasn't ill, he would be up before dawn and pottering about his plot till dark. Often he would go down into the cellar, sit on the bottom step and ponder. "Dratted devils! Why couldn't they live he/e!" he would mutter to himself as he climbed back into the daylight. This remark referred to his sons and daughter. He hated them for having left him and gone to live in town.

With Yurka it was different. His home was in the next village, where there was no ten-year school. He had no father. His mother had three other children besides himself to look after. His father had been drowned while rafting timber. The three other children were all younger than Yurka. His mother worked day and night, she was so keen on Yurka finishing his ten years at school. So was Yurka. In fact, he dreamed of going to college. To become a surgeon.

The old man, however, seemed not to notice Yurka's poverty and charged him five rubles a month. They did their cooking separately, each for himself. Sometimes, towards the end of the

month Yurka would run out of provisions. The old man would cast many a sidelong glance at the boy eating his dry bread, before he asked, "Run short, have you?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'll let you have something and you can make it up after."

"All right."

The old man would weigh out a couple of kilograms of millet and Yurka would make himself some gruel.

Of a morning they would stand at the stove, chatting.

"Still want to finish your studies, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I'm going to be a surgeon."

"How much longer will that take?"

"Eight years. Medical school takes six years, not five, like the others."

"You'll peg out before you get to be a surgeon, I reckon. How's your mother going to find the money?"

"I'll get a grant. Other boys do it... There are two from our village going through college on their grants."

The old man would stare into the fire, evidently remembering his own children.

"What's the mighty attraction of town?"

"Education ... that's the attraction. When you're a surgeon you can go back to the country and work. Personally, I'd rather work in the country."

"Do they earn such a mighty lot at it then?"

"Who? Surgeons?"

"Aye."

"Certainly not. They get very little, less than anyone. They had an increase recently, I know. But still..."

"Then what's the sense in straining your guts out for so many years? Go and train as a lorry driver, then get a job. Look how much they earn! And then there's what they make on the quiet, delivering wood to someone and state-farm hay to someone else. You'd be a help to your mother then. She's got three others on her hands, you know."

Yurka would be stuck for a reply to that. The mention of his mother and younger brothers hurt. Of course, it was hard for mother... But this talk only made him all the more resentful of the old man.

"We'll manage," he would say curtly. "That's no one else's business."

"Stands to reason," the old man assented. "They've got you all mixed up with this here studying, set you all a-wandering, like..." He failed to find a suitable comparison. "We used to live all right before without any study-by God's grace. We never went hungry."

"That's all you can think of—what it was like before!"

"And why not?.. Now they've made all them aeroplanes—the filthy things."

"You'd rather go by cart or lie on your stove-bed, I suppose?"

"What's so bad about that? If I go by cart at least I know I'll get there in my own good time. But if you have a crash in one o'them aeroplanes, there's no picking up the pieces afterwards."

And so they carried on every morning, until Yurka went off to school. The old man had to unburden himself to face the long day of silence; Yurka, on the other hand, though irritated by the old man's tiresome grumbling, derived some satisfaction from defending the New—the aeroplanes, education, town life, books, the cinema...

Strangely enough, the old man did not believe in God either.

"They've nothing better to do, them whimperers, so all they do is wail," he would say about religious folk. "Work—that's the only answer. Then there'll be peace and plenty."

But by working he meant only for yourself, on your own bit of land, your own vegetable plot. Like in the old days. He had stopped working for the collective farm long ago, though some of the old men of his age were still doing their bit—looking after the hives, keeping an eye on the crops, or doing a job as watchmen.

"You've got a kulak mentality," Yurka told the old man one day when he was cross with him.

The old man held his peace when he heard that. Then he said in a strange manner, "Arise, ye cursed by the earth!" And cleared his nostrils noisily, by blowing first through one, then the other. Then he wiped his nose with the hem of his shirt and concluded, "You'd have made a good commissar, you would. They used to be young 'uns, the commissars, in those days."

Yurka felt flattered.

"Cursed *of* the earth, not *by...*" he corrected the old man.

"Don't come out with that one, about the kulak deviation, or they'll be chopping a chunk off my allotment. I've got a whole strip more than what I'm entitled to."

"You can keep it, for all I care."

"It's gone off a bit now," the old man said after a while. "Everything went dark before my eyes."

Yurka didn't want to talk any more. He had his homework to do.

"What are you learning about now?"

"Astronomy," Yurka replied curtly, implying that he had no desire for conversation.

"What's that about?"

"Outer space. Where our cosmonauts fly to."

"Gagarin, eh?"

"Not only Gagarin. There are a lot of them now."

"Why do they fly there? What for?"

"That's a fine question!" Yurka again leaned back on his chair. "You certainly ask them! Think they'd be better off lying on top of a stove, do you?"

"Stove! Stove! You're always poking that at me!" the old man burst out offendedly. "Live as long as I have, then you can talk."

"I didn't say it to offend you. But fancy asking why people are pioneering outer space! That really is..."

"Well, explain it to me then. What do they teach you for? So that you can bite an old man's head off?"

"Well, in the first place, space exploration is a —a necessity. There'll come a time when people will land on the Moon. And later on they'll fly to

Venus. And on Venus there may be other people living there. Won't it be interesting to have a look at them?"

"Are they like us?"

"That I can't say for sure. They may be a bit uglier because the atmosphere there is different—more pressure."

"They'll be wanting to fight us, I expect."

"Why should they?"

"What are you here for, they'll say." The old man's interest was awakened. "An uninvited guest is worse than a Tatar, as the saying goes."

"They won't do anything of the kind. They'll be as glad as we are. No one knows yet who's more intelligent—perhaps they are. Then we'll be able to learn from them. And when we've developed our technology, we can fly further on..."

Yurka himself was captivated by the prospects unfolding before mankind. He jumped up and started pacing about the room. "We don't yet know how many planets there are that resemble our Earth! There may be millions! And living, thinking creatures on all of them. We'll fly to and fro to see each other... And in the end there'll be a—a universal mankind. We'll all be the same."

"Going to marry each other, are you?"

"I'm talking about education! Somewhere perhaps there are beings that are so developed we can all learn from them. Perhaps they've discovered everything already and we're only taking the very first steps. Then we shall be able to live in that state of bliss that religion calls paradise. Suppose you want to see your sons from just where you are now, up there on the

stove. Go ahead, switch on the video set, tune in to the right wave and here they are, talk as much as you like. Or perhaps you want to pay a visit to your daughter, nurse your little grandson for a bit? Up you go onto the roof, start a small helicopter and in *x* minutes you'll be at your daughter's house. And your grandson... How old's your grandson now?"

"Seven."

"He'll read to you aloud from *War and Peace* because his development will be much faster than it is today. And medicine will make such progress that people will live to be a hundred or a hundred and twenty."

"Now that's laying it on a bit too thick."

"Why?! Scientists are working on that very problem today. A hundred and twenty is considered the normal lifespan. We haven't got sufficient data as yet, but we'll borrow it from our neighbours in the Galaxy."

"Can't you manage it yourselves, so that we'll all live to be a hundred and twenty?"

"No, that we can't manage yet. It's a slow process. Perhaps we'll get to the stage when we'll live to be a hundred and twenty, but not in the near future. It'll be quicker to build a spaceship to fly to a Galaxy where that problem may have been solved already. They may have discovered some medicine..."

"You wouldn't want to live a hundred and twenty years anyway. You'd get tired of it."

" *You* might not, but others will be glad to. There'll be a special medicine..."

"You and your 'medicine' ... you might at least discover a medicine to take off a hangover. My head—it feels like an emptied still."

"You shouldn't drink."

"Go to..."

They fell silent.

Yurka sat down to his books again.

"This will be, that will be-that's all you can talk about," the old man began again. "Like talking big, you do. You, for instance, are going to study for sixteen years, but what'll you do for a man when he's about to die?"

"Cut something out of him."

"What's the use of that if his time's up?"

"I don't answer such ... ignorant questions."

"You've got no answer—that's why."

"No answer?.. What about all these people!" Yurka scooped up an armful of books and pointed to them. "Haven't they any answer? Have you ever read even one of them?"

"There's nothing to read in 'em-just a pack of lies."

"Very well!" Yurka jumped up and started pacing the room again. "There used to be a disease called plague didn't there?"

"Cholera?"

"That's right, cholera."

"Used to be. Back in 'twenty..."

"Where is it now? Is there any about?"

"Lord forbid! It might come back..."

"That's just the point—it won't. We've learnt how to combat it. Take another example. Suppose you were bitten by a mad dog, what would happen to you?"

"I'd get rabies."

"Yes, and you would have died. But now you get forty injections and it's all over. You're safe. Tuberculosis was considered incurable, wasn't it? But now? Six months' treatment and a man's right as rain! Who thought of all this? Scientists! 'Lies'... You ought to keep quiet if you can't understand."

Yurka's attack put the old man on his mettle. "All right. I'll let you have it about the dog. But what about snake-bite? What could the doctors do about that? But the old leech-woman, she'd come and whisper a charm and it'd pass off in no time. And she never studied at no colleges."

"It wasn't a fatal bite, that's all."

"Go and try it. Just let a snake take a nip at you..."

"By all means! I'll have an injection beforehand and it can bite me for all it's worth—I'll only smile."

"A swelled head, that's what you've got!"

"But here they are!" Yurka pointed at the books again. "People tried these things out on themselves! Do you know that when Academician Pavlov was dying he called in his students and started dictating to them a description of every stage in his own death."

"How could he?"

"Like this. 'My feet are going cold,' he says, 'make a note of that.' So they put that down. Then he lost all sensation in his hands. So he tells them. 'My hands have gone numb.' "

"And they were writing it all down?"

"Yes. Then his heart began to fail and he told them to note that. They were crying their eyes out, of course, but they wrote it down." Yurka felt his own eyes beginning to smart with tears. The story made a deep impression on the old man too.

"What then?"

"Then he died. But he told them everything right up to the last moment, because it was needed for science. And you with your leech-women would leave us in ignorance for another thousand years... This used to be, that used to be!..' Did you have this in the old days?!" Yurka went over to the wall and plugged in the radio. A woman was singing.

"Where is she? She's not here, is she?"

"Who isn't?"

"The woman that's singing."

"But that comes over the wires."

"Not wires but radio waves! Wires! The wires are only here in the village. But she may be singing somewhere hundreds of miles away—do you think the wires stretch all that way?"

"Could be. Last year, when I went to see Vanka, there was wires hanging from poles all the way."

Yurka decided to drop the argument.

"It's no use talking to you. I've got my homework to do."

"Get on with it then."

"But you keep distracting me..." Yurka sat down at the table, put his hands over his ears and started reading.

For a long time there was no sound in the cottage.

"Is there a picture of him?" the old man asked at last.

"Who?"

'That scientist, the one who was dying."

"Academician Pavlov? Here he is."

Yurka handed the old man a book, pointing out the photograph of Pavlov. The old man studied it seriously and at great length.

"He was an old fellow by then."

"He was hale and hearty right up to old age, and never got drunk like ... some people." Yurka took the book back. "And he didn't lie in bed over a stove, cursing and swearing. He used to play *gorodki* right up to the last day when he was taken ill. And the number of dogs he operated on to show their reflexes!.. It's thanks to him we know about the nervous system. Why are you sick now?"

"Because of my hangover. I know that without Pavlov telling me."

"Yes, it's a hangover all right, but yesterday you crushed your nervous system, damped it down, and today it's... straightening up. You've developed a conditioned reflex. As soon as you draw your pension you must have a bottle of vodka. You can't do without it." Yurka almost enjoyed proving to the old man so calmly and convincingly how much harm his drinking was doing to him. The old man listened. "So what must you do? You must overcome this reflex. You draw your pension at the post-office. You set off for home, but your feet take you in the direction of the village shop. So what you must do is walk

straight past it. Or go by another street altogether."

"I'll only feel worse."

"You'll feel worse once, twice, three times. Then you'll get used to it. You'll walk calmly past the village shop and laugh at the idea of going in."

The old man raised himself on his elbow and with trembling fingers rolled a cigarette and lit it. He took one drag and began to cough.

"Oh, damn and blast it... Ach!.. Turns me inside out, it does. Well, I'll be damned!"

Yurka sat down to his books again.

The old man climbed wheezily down from the stove-bed, put on his boots and sheepskin, picked up a knife and went out into the covered porch.

Where's he off to now, Yurka wondered.

The old man was gone for a long time. Yurka was about to go and see what had become of him going out like that, with a knife. But at that moment he reappeared, carrying a slab of fatback as big as his hand.

"Got any bread?" he asked sternly.

"Yes. Why?"

"Here you are then. Have some fat on it, or you'll work yourself to a frazzle with them academicians of yours— before you've studied 'em all."

Yurka didn't know what to say.

"I won't be able to pay you back. We haven't got any..."

"Eat up, lad. There's a teapot on the stove. It's still hot, I reckon... Make a proper meal of it."

Yurka fetched the teapot from the stove, poured himself a mug of still warm tea, cut the bread and fatback into slices and started eating. The old man climbed back on to the stove-bed above the stove with some difficulty and looked down from there at Yurka.

"How's the fatback?"

"Very good!" Yurka said in English. "First rate!"

"You have to know how to feed a pig. Some people are daft and start feeding it up in autumn. Then there's nothing but fat, no meat at all. And with some it's the other way round—they starve the animal because they think it'll be more lean. Not everyone likes fat, you see. Then when they kill the beast, there's neither fat, nor lean. But what you have to do is feed it up for a week, then go easy for a bit, on half rations, then feed it up for another week, then go easy again... Then you'll get it in layers—a layer of fat, a layer of lean. And it takes skill to do the salting..."

Yurka listened and tucked into the chilled, appetising bacon fat, which really was tasty.

"This is fine. Thanks a lot."

"Full up?"

"Uh-huh." Yurka cleared away the bread and the teapot. There was still some fat left. "Where do I put this?"

"Take it out into the porch and leave it on the tub. You can have some more in the evening."

Yurka took the fatback into the porch, returned, patted his tummy and said cheerfully, "Now I'll be able to think better. Sitting all the time like this makes your head swim a bit."

"That's right," the old man said contentedly, stretching out again on his back. "0-oh! Blast it all!.. It all comes back at you as soon as you lie down."

"Shall I run and buy you a half bottle?" Yurka offered.

The old man said nothing for a while.

"It'll go off. Later on you can throw the chickens a bit of corn and a fork or two of hay for the cow. Only don't forget to shut the gate after you."

"All right. Now what have we got left? Geography. We'll be through that in two ticks." Yurka was in high spirits. He had made a good meal, his homework was almost finished; he would be able to go skiing this evening.

"What about his own kith and kin? Didn't he have any?" the old man asked all of a sudden.

"Who?"

"That Academician. Was there only students there?"

"Pavlov, you mean? There may have been relatives too. I don't know for sure. I'll ask at school tomorrow."

"He'd have had some children, wouldn't he?"

"Probably, I'll find out tomorrow."

"He must have had. He couldn't have dictated much without his own folk round him. It's hard being alone."

Yurka decided not to argue. He could have said, what about the students! But he left it at that.

"Of course," he agreed. "It's hard being alone."

I WANT TO LIVE

The ground rises a little and the trees give way to a clearing and in that clearing stands a small log cabin. Nothing special, just a shed really with walls thirteen or fourteen logs high and no porch —and no roof either sometimes. Such rough shelters have been built in the taiga since time began. One day in spring a few men will appear from nowhere, chop down some of the straighter pine, strip the bark and, later on, in the fine days of early autumn it takes them no more than a week, working with three or four axes, to shape the logs and knock them together. Somewhere nearby they'll find clay and stones and put in a small stove with a chimney-stack and build a rough bunk to sleep on. And there you are—a place to live in for as long as you feel like it.

If you go into one in winter it won't seem very cosy. Frost as thick as your hand on the walls and in every cranny, and a dank, lingering smell of smoke.

But then you get a few logs crackling in the stove, the place begins to reek of thawing clay and the walls start dripping. The air gets so thick it's better to fill the stove and go outside for a while to chop a supply of firewood. In half an hour, however, that little cabin is much warmer and the air is not so heavy. You can throw off your coat and pack more logs into the stove. The walls are still steaming a bit and the stove is blazing hot. And that's when a sense of peace

comes over a man. "A-ah!" he feels like saying aloud. "This is the life!" Soon the whole place is nearly dry, but the bunk boards are still cold. No matter— you haven't long to wait. You can spread your sheepskin on them, put your rucksack under your head, stretch your legs out to the fire and what a drowsiness comes over you! It's too much trouble even to get up and put a few more logs in the stove. But you had better.

By this time there's a whole pile of glowing embers in the grate. The logs catch at once, like birch bark. Just in front of the stove there's a stump. You can sit down on it, have a smoke and —think. You can do some good thinking when you're alone. It's dark, except for the light from the stove playing on the floor, the walls and the ceiling. And the things you remember—God knows what! You may suddenly recall taking a girl home for the first time. The way you just walked along beside her without saying a word, like a fool... And before you know what, you're sitting there grinning from ear to ear. And you feel just great!

It's really warm by now. Time to brew up some tea-some of that green stuff, in bricks, with a grassy smell that reminds you of summer.

...So sat old Nikitich one evening in the twilight, sucking at his pipe in front of just such a stove.

It was hot in the cabin. But outside the frost was bitter. Nikitich felt in a good mood. Almost since boyhood he had been roaming the taiga, making his living by hunting. He went mainly for squirrels, but sometimes he had brought down a

stray winter bear. In case of such an encounter he always carried five or six buckshot cartridges in the left-hand pocket of his coat. He loved the taiga. Specially in winter. The silence was so complete that it got him down a bit at times. But not the solitude. That gave him a sense of freedom. Nikitich would screw up his eyes and look around, knowing that he and he alone was master of this great white kingdom.

So there he sat, smoking.

Skis scraped on the snow outside, then all was quiet again. He had a feeling that someone had looked in at the window. Then the skis scraped sharply again, approaching the door, and someone knocked twice—with a ski-stick by the sound of it.

"Anyone there?"

The voice was young, but husky from the frost and long silence—not a man who knew how to talk to himself.

It's not a hunter, Nikitich concluded. A hunter wouldn't ask. He'd just come straight in.

"Aye, there is."

The man at the door took off his skis and propped them against the wall. The step creaked and, as the door opened, Nikitich was only just able to make out in the steamy white air a tall young man in quilted trousers and jacket, wearing a belt and an old army cap with earf laps.

"Who is it?"

"A man." Nikitich lighted a splinter of wood and held it above his head. For a time they surveyed each other in silence.

"All on your own?"

"Aye, I'm on my own. Come in. What're you dithering about in the doorway for!"

The lad walked over to the stove, pulled off his mittens, tucked them under his arm and held out his hands to the fire.

"Hell of a frost outside."

"Aye, it's frosty." Only now did Nikitich notice that the lad was not carrying a gun. He was certainly no hunter. Not a bit like one. Not the face or the clothes for it. "And it'll be frostier still before March is out."

"March? You mean April!"

"Not by the old calendar. It's still March. Warmest gear while March is here, that's our motto round this way. You're lightly dressed." Nikitich said nothing about his not having a gun.

"Not to worry," the young man rejoined. "Are you all by yourself here?"

"Sure I am. You've asked that already."

The lad had nothing to say to that.

"Sit down. I'll brew up some tea."

"I'll warm myself a bit first..."

No, he wasn't a local man, he didn't speak like one. Nikitich was itching to know more about him but an ingrained habit of not rushing the questions proved stronger than curiosity.

The lad warmed his hands and lit a cigarette.

"Nice place you have here."

While he was lighting up, the old man was able to take a closer look at him, at the pale, handsome face with thick eyelashes. When he dragged hungrily at the cigarette and opened his mouth, two front teeth showed a glint of gold. He

certainly hadn't had a shave for a long time. But the beard was a neat one, curling slightly at the cheekbones... He looked very thin... The lad noticed the old man's gaze upon him, picked up the half-burnt match and eyed him attentively, then threw the match away. His glance made an impression on Nikitich. It was direct, unflinching — "chilly" was how the old man defined it.

"You'd better sit down, there's no sense in standing."

The lad smiled.

"That's not the way to say it, Dad. People say, won't you sit down."

"Well, won't you sit down, then. What's the difference?"

"I will anyway. You're not expecting anyone, are you?"

"No, not at this time. But there's plenty of room if anyone does turn up." Nikitich shifted over. The lad sat down beside him on the stump and again held out his hands to the fire. They weren't the hands of a working man, but he looked sturdy enough all the same. And Nikitich liked his smile —there was nothing "uppish" about it, just a restrained friendly smile. And those gold teeth— handsome young fellow. If you gave him a shave and a suit to wear, he'd make a real schoolteacher. Nikitich had a weakness for schoolteachers.

"What are you—a geologist?" he asked.

"A what?"

"You know-the ones that go about prospecting."

"Ah!.. Yes, lam."

"How do you manage without a gun? That's risky."

"I got left behind by my party," the lad replied, not very readily. "Is your village far away?"

"About a hundred miles."

The lad nodded, closed his eyes and sat for a while enjoying the warmth, then shook himself and sighed.

"I'm whacked out."

"Been on your own for long?"

"Yes, a long time. You haven't anything to drink, I suppose?"

"I might have somewhere."

The young man brightened up.

"Good! This cold has got into my guts. It's enough to freeze you stiff. April, they call it..."

Nikitich went outside and returned with his rucksack, in which there was a slab of bacon fat. He lighted the lantern hanging from the ceiling.

"Someone ought to teach you fellows how to live in the taiga alone. Sending you out like this... What do you know about it! Why, only last year I found one myself—after the spring thaw. A young fellow. He had a beard too. Rolled himself up in a blanket and that was the end of him." Nikitich cut slices of fat on the edge of the bunk. "But if you turned me loose in the taiga, I could last out the whole winter alone, without a murmur. Enough cartridges, that's all I need. And matches."

"You still make use of the cabin though."

"Why should I bed down in the snow when there's a place like this? I'm not my own enemy."

The lad undid his belt, took off his sweater and strolled across the cabin. Broad in the shoulders,

well built. He had warmed up now and there was a brighter light in his eyes. He must be thanking his lucky stars he had found some warmth and a living soul to be with. Now he had lighted another cigarette. His cigarettes smelled good. Nikitich liked talking to townspeople, though he despised them for their helplessness in the taiga; sometimes he made a little on the side, guiding a prospecting party. Inwardly they made him laugh, but he enjoyed listening to their talk and willingly took part in it himself. He was touched by the friendly way they addressed him and by their condescending laughter. But if he were to leave them to their own devices they would stand no more chance than a litter of blind puppies. It was even more interesting when there were a few girls in the group. They would put up with anything rather than complain. Always wanted to be treated the same as the boys and not be helped. Yes, and they all slept in a heap together, but it didn't seem to matter-no hanky-panky. If it had been the local lads and lassies there'd be no end of trouble. But not with these. And yet, they could be pretty as a picture in their narrow thousers and tight jumpers and their heads all wrapped up against the gnats. Real cute they were. But the lads didn't take much notice, just as if it was the usual thing.

"Who're you looking for?"

"Where?"

"I mean, what did you come here for?"

The lad gave a short laugh, to himself.

"My fortune."

"Fortune... Fortune, lad, is slippery as an eel-pout. You think you've got a hold of it, then away it goes." Nikitich was in the mood to talk as he usually did with townsfolk—original like, when he'd got them listening and exchanging glances, and one of them maybe even writing something down in his notebook. Nikitich could keep up that kind of talk all night—as long as they'd listen with their long ears. His own village folk would have dismissed him as an old chatterbox, but these liked to listen. Very nice that was. And sometimes he would think to himself, darn me, what a speaker I am. He could spin a yarn as good as any priest in the old days. The way he described the forest, for instance. It had a soul; you mustn't spoil it or lay into it with an axe for nothing, or else it would dry up, and if it dried up you would dry up yourself. Yes, you'd just feel overcome with misery and everything would dry up inside you, and you wouldn't even know why. "Some folk, you know come out from town with their guns, letting fly in all directions. Don't care who they hit, male or female, as long as they kill something. People ought to have their arms pulled off for that kind of thing. I've known them kill a she-bear before now, with two cubs. Those cubs will die. It's a dirty game killing animals just for the hell of it. That's fortune for you," Nikitich went on, returning to the present.

But the young man didn't want to listen. He went over to the window and stared out into the darkness, then said as if he had just woken up, "It'll soon be spring anyway."

"Aye, spring's bound to come. No two ways about it. Sit down, lad. Let's eat what the Lord has given."

They melted some snow, diluted the pure alcohol and drank it, helping it down with the frozen fat. Nikitich felt fine. He threw a few more logs into the stove. But the lad couldn't keep away from that window. He breathed a spyhole through the frosty glass and kept staring out into the night.

"Who'd you expect to see out there now?" Nikitich said in surprise. He wanted to talk.

"Freedom," the lad replied. He gave a sigh. But not a sad sigh. There had been a hard, fierce note in his voice when he had said "Freedom". He swung away from the window.

"Give me another drink, Dad." He unbuttoned the collar of his black cotton shirt, smacked his chest with a broad, heavy hand, and rubbed himself. "I need it."

"You ought to eat something, or it'll throw you on an empty belly."

"No, it won't. It won't throw me." And he put his arm firmly and affectionately round the old man's neck and began to sing.

To the death-cell where I lay.
Dank and drear, no light of day.
Came an old grey-headed man...

He broke off smiling affectionately. His eyes were clear and shining with joy.

"Let's drink, good old man!"

"Been feeling lonely, have you?" Nikitich smiled too. The more he saw of the lad the more he liked him. Young, strong, handsome. And he might have been lost. "Aye, lad, you can come to a nasty end like that, you know. It's a rotten business to be without a gun in the taiga."

"Nothing's going to happen to us, Dad. We'll survive!"

Again he spoke firmly, and for a moment his eyes had a faraway expression in them, and again that "chilly" look... It was hard to tell what had crossed his mind, as if he had remembered something. Something that he didn't want to remember. He raised the glass and drained it in one gulp, gave a grunt of satisfaction, shook his head and chewed some of the fat. Then he lighted another cigarette and stood up—he just couldn't keep still. He paced about the cabin with broad strides, halted in the middle, stuck his hands on his hips and again stared into the distance with that faraway look in his eyes.

"I want to live, Dad."

"Everyone wants that. Do you think I don't? And I'll soon be—"

"I want to live!" the big handsome lad repeated with a cheerful fierceness, not listening to the old man. "You don't know what life is. It's..." He thought for a moment and gritted his teeth. "It's ... it's a darling-that's what life is."

The drink had gone to Nikitich's head and he tittered.

"You talk about life as if it was a woman."

"Women are cheap trash." The lad seemed to be gripped by a kind of wild elation. He went on

talking regardless of the old man, and now Nikitich wanted to listen. The lad's relentless strength was affecting him too.

"Aye, women, of course, they're... But without them it's not so..."

"I'll get her, this darling of mine," the lad reached forward and clenched his fists. "I'll get my darling by the throat... Don't you remember me, dearest—Kolya's the name? You've forgotten me, eh?" It was just as if the lad was addressing some woman and was surprised at her forgetfulness. "Kolya, have you forgotten?.. But Kolya remembers you. Kolya hasn't forgotten you." Either he was glad about something or he was planning a fierce revenge. "Here I am. Step this way, madam. We're going to have a nice little chat. No, I won't hurt you. But you'll give me everything. Everything! Because I'll take it!"

"Did a woman really get you het up like that?" Nikitich asked wonderingly.

The lad shook his head.

"That woman's name is freedom. You don't know her either. Dad. You're an animal. You like it out here. But you don't know the lights of the big city—the lure and glitter of them. They're all such nice people there. It's warm and soft and there's sweet music playing. They all have good manners and are very much afraid of death. And when I'm in town, the whole town belongs to me. So why are they there and I here? Get me?"

"But you're not here forever..."

"You don't understand." The young man was serious now, and stern. "I ought to be there

because I'm not afraid of anyone. I'm not afraid of death. And that means life belongs to me."

Nikitich shook his head.

"I don't see what you're driving at, lad."

The young man went over to the bunk and filled the glasses. He looked tired all of a sudden.

"I'm on the run. Dad," he said tonelessly. "Let's drink, eh? Will you drink to that?"

Mechanically Nikitich clinked glasses. The lad drank, then looked at the old man... Nikitich was holding his glass as before, staring at the lad.

"What's up?"

"I don't get you."

"Drink," the lad commanded. He reached for another cigarette but the packet was empty. "Give me one of yours."

"Mine's leaf tobacco."

"I don't care what it is."

They lighted up. The lad settled himself on the stump, nearer the fire.

There was a long silence between them.

"They'll catch you, that's for sure," Nikitich said. He was not exactly sorry for the lad, but he had suddenly imagined him, such a big handsome fellow, being marched along under guard. He was sorry for the lad's youth, his strength and good looks. They'd lock him up and it would all be wasted, all thrown away. Good looks cut no ice where he was going. What a waste. "You shouldn't have done it," he said soberly.

"What?"

"Tried to escape. Times are different now—you'll get caught."

The lad made no reply. He sat staring thoughtfully at the fire, then leaned forward and tossed a log into the stove.

"You ought to have stuck it out... It's no good."

"Cut it out!" the lad snapped abruptly. He had also become strangely sober. "I've got a brain of my own."

"Stands to reason," Nikitich assented. "Have you far to go?"

"Be quiet for a bit, can't you!"

He must have a mother and father, Nikitich thought to himself, gazing at the back of the lad's head. He'll come and tell them the glad news, the son of a gun.

They were silent for about five minutes. The old man knocked the ash out of his pipe and filled it again. The lad stared into the fire.

"Is your village the district centre?" he asked, without turning his head.

"Not likely! That's another sixty miles on from us. You'll never make it. All that way through the taiga in winter..."

"I'll live with you for three days or so, build up my strength a bit..." He didn't ask, just stated the fact.

"Stay if you like, I don't mind. I guess you had a long stretch ahead of you. Couldn't stick it, eh?"

"A very long stretch."

"What'd you get it for?"

"Never ask anyone that question. Dad."

Nikitich puffed at his pipe, got it going again and began to cough as the smoke caught in his throat. Between coughs he said, "No business of mine!.. It's a pity though... You'll be caught..."

"Who knows, I might be lucky. They won't get me for nothing. Let's have some sleep."

"You get your head down. I'll sit here for a bit till the wood burns out so that I can close the chimney. Otherwise we'll be frozen stiff by morning."

The stranger spread his jersey on one of the bunks and looked round for something to put under his head. Noticing Nikitich's gun hanging on the wall, he went over and took it down, examined it, then put it back.

"That's an old one."

"It'll do me for a while. There's a rug over there in the corner. Spread that under you and use your jersey for your head. And keep your feet near the stove. It'll be right cold by morning."

The young man spread the rug and stretched himself with a noisy sigh.

"Little Tashkent," he said for some reason. "Aren't you scared of me, Dad?"

"Scared of you?" the old man's voice expressed astonishment. "Why should I be scared of you?"

"Well... I'm a convict, am I not? Maybe I was in for murder."

"For murder God will punish you, not man. You can run away from men, but there's no escape from Him."

"Do you believe in religion? You're an Old Believer, I bet."

"An Old Believer! Would an Old Believer have been drinking vodka with you?"

"True enough. But don't start fuddling my brains with your god talk. It makes me sick." The young man spoke casually, in a rather flat voice.

"If I ever ran into that Christ of yours, I'd stick a knife in him right away."

"What for?"

"What for?.. Because he told all those fairy-tales, because he lied. No one's kind to others in this world. And your gentle Jesus taught people to be meek and mild. The bastard!" The young man's voice was recovering its hard, aggressive note, but without the former elation. "Who's kind in this world? Am I? Are you?"

"I've never done anyone any harm..."

"You kill animals, don't you? Did he teach that?"

"You can't compare! A man's not the same as an animal."

"It's alive, isn't it? That's what you're always babbling about, you two-faced swine."

Nikitich could not see the lad's face, but he had a mental picture of it—pale and bearded; in the warm stillness of the little log cabin the frenzied voice of this young man with such a fine and handsome face, who was so hopelessly down on his luck, sounded wild and absurd.

"What are you pitching into me for?"

"Don't tell lies! Don't swindle people, you creeping Jesus. If they taught you to be patient, be patient! But what are you really like? Before you've finished praying you're pulling off your pants to get on a woman, you dirty swine. I'd invent a new Christ for today, I would, one that knew how to slug 'em on the jaw. Lie, would you? Take that then, you creep!"

"Don't swear!" Nikitich said sternly. "You were let in here in good faith, and now you're snarling

at me. You've got your back up because they put you in gaol. They didn't put you there for nothing. So who's to blame?!"

"H-uh." The young man gritted his teeth and said nothing.

"I'm no priest and this is no church for you to spit out your fury at. This is the taiga, where everyone's equal. Remember that. Or you won't ever reach your precious freedom—you'll break your neck first. You know what they say about being a lion against sheep and a sheep against lions. You'll meet your match one day. And if you offend him for nothing, he'll show you where to look for your freedom."

"Don't be angry, Dad," the young man said appeasingly. "I hate being preached at! It makes my blood boil! They dangle a bunch of tapeworms in front of your nose and tell you how good they are and that's the way to live. I have it!" he almost shouted. "I won't live like that. They're lying! It stinks of death! We can all be sympathetic over a clean washed corpse, but try to love the living, with all their dirt on them. There're no saints on earth! I've never seen any. Why invent them?!" The young man raised himself on his elbow; his eyes glowed with frightening ferocity from the white blob in the darkness that was his face.

"When you cool down a bit, you'll understand. If there weren't any good people in the world, all life would have come to an end long ago. We'd have eaten each other or slaughtered ourselves. It wasn't any Christ who taught me that, it's my own belief. As for saints—you're right there. I'm

not a bad man, no one would say I was a bad or wicked man. But when I was young... There used to be an Old Believers' chapel the other side of the hill. There was a family living there, an old man and his wife and their daughter-about twenty she was. Maybe they weren't so old, but they seemed so to me then. They went away afterwards... Well, as I was saying, they had a daughter. And the whole family was as holy as could be; that's why they'd withdrawn from the world, you see, to keep away from sin. And one day I tempted their daughter into a birch-grove and had a bit of the old you know what with her. Fine lass she was, big and strong. The end of it was she had a child. And I was a married man..."

"And you say you never did anyone any harm?"

"Well, there you are. It turns out that I'm no saint either. I didn't force her, mind you. It was all done by fondness, but all the same... I let a fatherless child into the world. I feel sorry when I think of it. He must be a big lad now, cursing me, I bet."

"You didn't kill anyone; you gave life. Maybe you saved her. Maybe she broke away from her family after that. They might have driven her crazy with their kneeling and praying and she'd have hung herself. She'd never have known what it was to lie with a man. You did a good thing. Why worry?"

"Good or bad, that's how it was. Not much good in it, of course. Anything left in that bottle?"

"Grog? Just a drop. You have it, I don't want any more."

The young man drank, again with a deep breath of satisfaction. He ate nothing.

"Do you drink a lot?"

"No, it's just because I was so cold. This isn't the way to drink, Dad. You want the proper atmosphere for drinking. Music... Good cigarettes, champagne... Women. Everything gentle and civilised." The young man again fell into a muse and leaned back with his hands behind his head. "I hate whores. It's like being in a pigsty. But life can be beautiful! If I play with Death seven times in one night—get me?—if I feel her bony hand on my shoulder and her icy lips trying to kiss me on the forehead—that tires me. But after that I rest. I love and enjoy life more than all the public prosecutors put together. You talk about danger? Yes, it is dangerous. I don't care if my heart is in my mouth, if it's shaking like a sheep's tail, I go straight in and I won't trip up or turn back."

"What was your job before that?" Nikitich inquired.

"I was a supply agent. Cultural relations with other countries. I was quite a learned man. I used to give lectures on What the Colorado Beetle Is and How to Fight It'..." The young man's voice broke off and a minute or two later he said sleepily, "That's all. Dad... I'm off."

"Sleep well."

Nikitich raked the fire with a small poker, filled his pipe and began thinking about the young man. That was a life for you. Here was a fellow who had everything—good looks, health and a pretty good brain by the sound of it. And what of

it? Where would it get him? Roaming the forests? There was no doubt about it, town life drove them all crazy. They were all wrong-headed in those places. Nikitich's grandsons—three of them—also lived in a big city. Two were still at school and the other had a job and was married. They never bragged like this one, but the city had a hold over them. When they came out in the summer, they were bored. Nikitich would provide them with guns and guide them through the taiga, expecting them to brighten up and shake off the cares of study, to feel refreshed. They would pretend to enjoy it and Nikitich would be embarrassed because he had nothing else to please his grandsons with. He would feel as if he had cheated them. All they could think of was the city. And this young fellow on the bunk was crazy to be there too. In his position he ought to make a hideout for himself deep in the forest and lie low for about five years, if prison was so unbearable. But he was going straight to the very place where he might be picked up at every step. And he knew it but still he went. What's the power these cities have over them? I'm an old man, of course, and I've only been there three times in my life, maybe I don't understand. I dare say there's plenty of fun and bright lights. Still, I don't understand what it's all about, so I wouldn't think of running it down. If a man wants to be there, let him. As for me, I like it here. But as soon as they're out here they turn up their noses and say it's so boring and miserable. Why don't they look a bit closer! Before they've seen a thing, they start bragging about their city. You want to tell me

your fairy-tales about the big city? What if I were to tell you all I know! People don't listen to me. It's you they goggle at because you're from town. But it cuts no ice with me. I'm not impressed by the way you swagger along the pavements in your smart shoes. This one did enough swaggering and he got about fifteen years, I guess, for his beautiful life. Shop-breaking it was, I reckon. Had his fling, and then he came a cropper. And now he's asking for it again. He just can't live without the city. He'll be making a bee-line for some shop or other. Champagne... But how will he get it? They're a lot of fools... The city will eat you all up, bones and all. I'm sorry for you in your stupidity, but there's nothing I can do. There's no arguing with you.

The logs were burning out. Nikitich waited for the last spark to die among the ashes, then closed the chimney, put out the lantern and turned in beside the young man, who was now breathing steadily in his sleep, his arm twisted awkwardly under his side. He didn't so much as stir when Nikitich pulled it into a more comfortable position.

"Tired out, aren't you, you young jackanapes," Nikitich muttered. "But who makes you do it? If you could only look at yourself!"

Some time after midnight there was a sound of voices outside the cabin. Two or three men were talking.

The lad sat bolt upright, as if he had never been asleep. Nikitich also raised his head.

"Who's that?" the young man asked quickly.

"Darned if I know."

The lad slipped down off the bunk and with one ear to the door groped across the wall for the gun. Nikitich realised what he intended.

"Don't be a fool, lad!" he snapped quietly. "You'll only cause worse trouble."

"Who is it?" the young man asked again.

"I've told you I don't know."

"Don't let them in. Bolt the door."

"Who does that here, you fool! There's nothing to bolt it with. Get back to bed and don't move."

"I'm telling you, Dad..."

The lad had no time to finish. Someone had mounted the steps and was groping for the door handle. The lad darted lizard-like back to the bunk and from there managed to whisper, "Dad, I swear by God and the devil, if you give me away... Please, old chap. I'll never forget..."

"Get your head down," Nikitich commanded.

The door swung open.

"Aha!" a deep voice exclaimed cheerfully. "I said there was someone here. And it's warm! Come on in!"

"Close that door!" Nikitich said crossly, climbing down from the bunk. "Glad it's warm, are you! Well, open up a bit wider and it'll be warmer still!"

"All's well," the deep voice boomed. "It's warm and we're welcome."

Nikitich lighted the lantern.

Two other men entered. Nikitich recognised one of them as the chief of the district militia. All the hunters knew him because he pestered them about hunting cards and made them pay their dues. He was a tall, burly man of about fifty.

"Your name's Yemelyanov, isn't it?" he asked Nikitich.

"That's right. Comrade Protokin."

"Well, receive your guests."

The trio began pulling off their coats.

"Come out for a spot of shooting, eh?" Nikitich asked, not without a touch of sarcasm. He had no liking for these visiting sportsmen. They only made a lot of noise and went away again.

"Must have some relaxation. Who's that over there?" The militia chief had noticed the young man on the bunk.

"Geol'gist," Nikitich informed him shortly. "He got left behind by his party."

"Was he lost?"

"Aye."

"We haven't heard anything about it. Where were they making for? Did he say?"

"How could he! He could hardly get his mouth open he was that frozen. I warmed him up with a glass or two and now he's sleeping like the dead."

The militia chief lighted a match and held it over the lad's face. Not a muscle moved in it. He went on breathing steadily.

"You've filled him up all right." The chief's match burned out. "How is it we haven't heard anything?"

"Perhaps they didn't have time to report it?" one of the others suggested.

"No, he looks as if he's been roaming a long time. Did he mention how long he'd been on his own?"

"No," Nikitich replied. "Just said he had got left behind and that's all."

"Let him sleep it off. We'll sort this out in the morning. Well, are you chaps ready for bed?"

"Yes, but is there room?" the other two responded.

"Room enough," the chief proclaimed firmly. There were five of us last time too. We were stiff as boards by morning. We'd warmed the place up, but not enough. It must have been about fifty below outside."

They took off their coats and climbed on to the broad bunk. Nikitich resumed his place beside the young man.

The newcomers went on talking for a while about the affairs of the district and gradually fell silent.

Soon they were all asleep.

...Nikitich awoke as soon as the window began to glimmer. The young man was no longer at his side. Nikitich slid down cautiously off the bunk and felt in his pocket for matches. It has not occurred to him that there was anything wrong. He struck a match... No sign of the young man or his sweater—or of Nikitich's gun. The old man's heart contracted unpleasantly.

He had gone and taken the gun with him.

Nikitich dressed quietly, took one of the three guns stacked in the corner and felt in his pocket for the buckshot cartridges. He opened the door quietly and went out.

Day was just breaking. The temperature had risen during the night and a foggy haze diffused the faint colours of the dawn. At five paces nothing was yet visible. There was a smell of spring in the air.

Nikitich strapped on his skis and set out along the fresh trail that stood out clearly in the greyish snow.

"You son of a bitch, you rotten skunk," he swore softly. "Go and good riddance to you, but why take the gun! What can I do out here without a gun? Did you ever think of that? D'you think I earn thousands to be able to supply you all with guns? You know you'll only throw it away somewhere, you blighter. All you want to do is get out of the taiga, isn't it? And I'm supposed to sit here twiddling my thumbs without a gun. You people, you haven't got a spark of conscience or shame in you."

Gradually the snow whitened. It looked as if the day would be cloudy and warm.

The ski-trail did not lead in the direction of the village.

"So you're afraid of people, eh? You and your 'beautiful life'. You can take an old man's only gun, and that's nothing. But you won't get away from me, my lad. I could wear out seven of you, young though you are."

But the old man's anger was not great. He was more hurt than angry. He had done all he could for the fellow, and the lad had gone off with his gun. What a rotten thing to do!

Nikitich had already covered three kilometres. By now it was nearly broad daylight and the trail showed far ahead into the distance.

The young man must have got up early. And how quiet he was about it!

At one point he had stopped for a smoke; beside the trail were the marks where he had

plunged his sticks into the snow, a few scraps of leaf tobacco and a burnt match.

"So he took my pouch as well!" Nikitich spat angrily. "He's a bad lot, that one!" And he put on speed.

...He spotted the young man from a distance, in a ravine below him.

The lad was swinging along at a good pace but without hurrying. The gun was slung across his back.

He knows how to ski, Nikitich had to admit. He turned off the trail and set out to outflank his quarry, taking care that he was hidden from view by the long sloping ridge above the ravine. He knew almost exactly where they would meet. The young man would soon come to a narrow ride in the forest. He would pass along that and again run into thick woodland. And that was where Nikitich would be waiting for him.

"Now I'll have a proper look at you," Nikitich muttered not without malice, pushing hard on his sticks. Strangely enough he was extremely anxious to see that handsome face again. There was something deeply attractive about it. Perhaps it's the right thing for him to be so keen on this beaufitul life of his. What is there for him to do here, if you come to think of it? He'd just be wasted. Ah, life's a riddle, drat it!

When he reached the end of the ride Nikitich peered cautiously out of the thickets. There was no trail on the snow—he had got ahead. He selected the spot where the young man would probably emerge from the forest, crouched down in the bushes, made sure that his gun was loaded

and waited. His hunter's eyes noted the gun he was holding. It was a brand-new one from Tula, shiny and reeking of gunsmith's oil. They go hunting and it doesn't strike them that a gun shouldn't smell like that. Why, when you're hunting you'd better forget tobacco and wash your mouth out with tea or you'll reek for miles around, and put on some different clothes that have been hanging outside, so that they don't smell of living quarters. Call themselves hunters.

The young man came out on the ride and halted. He looked this way and that, stood for a moment, then quickly crossed the ride. Nikitich rose suddenly to meet him.

"Halt! Hands up!" he ordered loudly, to give the lad a shock. The lad's head came up with a look of horror in the eyes. He was about to raise his hands, but then he recognised Nikitich. "You say you're not afraid of anyone," Nikitich remarked. "And you're shitting your pants already."

The young man recovered quickly from his fright, and with something of an effort produced one of his charming smiles.

"Well, Dad... You certainly know how it's done. Just like on the films, damn you. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Now, listen to me," Nikitich went on in a businesslike tone. "Don't take the gun off your back, just reach behind you and empty the magazine. And turn everything out of your pockets too. It had sixteen cartridges left. Throw the whole lot on the snow and then step aside. If

you try any tricks, I'll shoot. And I mean what I say."

"I get you. Dad. I don't feel much like joking at the moment."

"You're a shameless thief."

"You said yourself the forest was no place to be in without a gun."

"What am I supposed to do here without it?"

"You're on your home ground."

"That's right, go on! I'm at home, am I? And what have I got at home—a gun factory?"

The young man scooped the cartridges out of his pockets; Nikitich counted fourteen. Then he reached behind his back, biting his lower lip and narrowing his eyes, which were fixed closely on the old man. Nikitich watched him just as closely, keeping his gun levelled at the young man's chest.

"What's the trouble?"

"I can't get them out..."

"Use your nails. Or give the butt a knock with your fist."

One cartridge fell out, then the other. "Right. Now move over there." The young man obeyed.

Nikitich gathered up the cartridges and put them in his coat pocket.

"Throw me the gun, but don't move otherwise." The young man removed the gun from his back and tossed it to Nikitich.

"Now sit down where you are and we'll have a smoke. Throw me the pouch that you stole too."

"I want a smoke sometimes."

"It's always what you want, isn't it? You never thought of me, you selfish devil. What was I to

smoke?" The lad made himself a cigarette and lighted it. "May I keep a little of your tobacco?"

"Yes. Got any matches?"

"Yes."

The lad took a handful of tobacco for himself and tossed the pouch to the old man. Nikitich also lighted up. They sat at a distance of about five paces from each other.

"Have they gone now? The lot that came in last night."

"They're still sleeping. They're good at that. Fooling about, I call it, not hunting. They just want a good time, but you can't have much of a good time in your own district—too many people watching. So they like to keep out of sight."

"Who are they?"

"The high-ups... Wasting good ammunition."

"Hum..."

"Did you think I wouldn't catch up with you?"

"I didn't think anything. You know one of them, don't you? Who was that? You mentioned his name... Protokin, wasn't it?"

"He works in social insurance. He saw to it that my old woman got a pension. I've seen him in the office."

The lad gave Nikitich a searching look.

"Is that where they give you passes for the holiday resorts?"

"That's right."

"You're twisting things, Dad. Surely you don't want to put me back in gaol? Just because of the gun."

"Why the hell should I want you in gaol?" Nikitich said quite sincerely.

"Sell me the gun. I have money."

"No," Nikitich replied firmly. "If you'd asked yesterday in a decent way, I might have done. But after the piggish way you've acted, I won't sell."

"I couldn't have waited till they woke up, could I?"

"You could have called me out in the night. 'I'm not so keen on talking to those people. Dad/ you could have said. 'Sell me the gun and I'll take myself off.' But you just stole it. We chop off a man's hands for thieving around here."

The lad settled his elbows on his knees and sank his head on his hands.

He said huskily, "Thanks for not giving me away last night."

"You won't get that freedom of yours all the same."

The lad tossed his head.

"Why not?"

"All the way across Siberia-that's no joke!"

"I only need to get as far as the railway, then a train will take me. I've got papers. But it's rough here without a gun. Sell it to me, won't you ?"

"No. And don't ask me again."

"I could start a new life, if only you'd help me out, Dad."

"Where did you get those papers? Bumped someone off, I expect?"

"Papers are made by man."

"So they're forged. D'you think they won't catch you with forged papers?"

"You worry about me like my own mother, don't you? They'll catch you, they'll catch you...' You're like a parrot. I tell you they won't catch me."

"If you mean to do some honest work, where will the cash come from for all your bottles of champagne?"

"I was just talking through my hat last night. Don't take any notice of that. I was drunk."

"Damn the lot of you..." The old man spat a pungent yellow gob of spittle on to the snow. "You could have a grand life, you young people. But you're like crazy dogs, chasing all over the world, can't find a place for yourselves. Were you so desperately hungry you had to go stealing? This madness is from overfeeding, that it is. You've never taken a real knock."

"I wouldn't say that, Dad..."

"Well, who's to blame then?"

"Let's drop it," the lad suggested. "You know what?" He looked anxiously at the old man. "That lot will be waking up soon and they'll see the gun is missing, and you and I with it. Won't they come looking for us?"

"They won't stir till sun-up."

"How do you know?"

"I know that. They had been on the booze yesterday. That cabin's so warm and cosy, they'll be laid out till dinnertime. They're in no hurry."

"Hm..." There was sadness in the young man's voice. "I'm in a real spot."

Suddenly it began to snow in big soft flakes. The air was warm and heavy.

"You're in luck," Nikitich looked at the sky.

"Why?" The lad followed his glance.

"This snow... It'll cover your tracks."

The young man held out his hand and let the snow-flakes settle on it. They melted.

"It'll soon be spring," he muttered with a sigh.

Nikitich looked at him as though to impress the image of this unusual person forever on his memory. He imagined him pushing on through the night—unarmed.

"How do you spend the night?"

"Take a nap by the fire... You don't get much sleep."

"Couldn't you have got away in summer? It'd have been a lot easier."

"They don't let you apply for the easy times. It's the lack of grub that's the worst. While you're getting from one village to another, you feel as if your guts were sticking to your spine. Still, never mind. Thanks for your hospitality." The young man rose. "You'd better go or that lot will be waking up."

The old man hesitated.

"There's one way out of this fix, you know," he said slowly. "I'll give you my gun. Tomorrow at about two or three in the morning you'll get to the village where I live..."

"And then what?"

"Don't hurry me. When you get there, you can knock up someone on the edge of the village and tell them you've found a gun—no, what would be the best idea?.. So that you can leave the gun for me. From our village it's a straight road to the station—twenty miles. Nothing to worry about there. Plenty of lorries. You'd be at the station by daybreak. Mind you, the road forks at one spot. Don't take the left turn because it leads to the district centre. Keep straight on."

"Dad..."

"Wait a minute! How about the gun? If you say you found it, they'll be worried to death and send out a search party. But I don't want to give it to you for good. I wouldn't take three of these for it," he pointed to the brand-new shot-gun on his knees.

The young man looked gratefully at him, and probably tried to make his eyes show as much gratitude as they could.

"Thank you, Dad."

"Why thank me? How do I get the gun back?"

The lad stepped towards the old man and sat down beside him.

"Let's think of something... I'll hide it somewhere and you'll pick it up later."

"Where?"

"In a haystack, somewhere not far from the village."

Nikitich considered this carefully.

"Where would you find a haystack at night? No, I've got it. Knock at the end house in the village and ask where Yefim Mazayev lives. They'll show you. He's a relative of mine. You'll go and tell Yefim that you met me in the taiga and I'm guiding a party of geol'gists to Snake Marsh. I've run out of cartridges, you tell him, and so I asked you to bring the gun back rather than carry it. He can expect me the day after tomorrow. But he had better not let anyone know I'm guiding those geol'gists. Tell him I'm making a bit on the side and when I get back we'll have a drink together, or else my old woman, she'll take all the money off me. Got it? Now leave me enough cash for a bottle—that Yefim is bound to want his due—and

we'll say good-bye. I'll let you have six cartridges. And two of buckshot—just in case. If you don't use 'em, throw them in the snow a good way from the village. Don't give 'em to Yefim. He's a crafty fellow—he'll smell a rat. Now have you got all that?"

"Yes, I have. And I'll never forget you, Dad."

"Right then... The way to the village is this. When the sun comes out—you'll know where it is anyway—keep it on your left at first. And as it gets higher, still keep it on your left. But at sunset make a turn so it's behind you, just behind your right ear. And then keep straight on. Now let's have a smoke before we go." They lighted up.

All of a sudden there seemed to be nothing more to say. They sat for a while, then rose. "Good-bye, Dad, and thanks."

"Off you go."

They moved off in different directions, but Nikitich stopped and called out to the lad.

"Can you hear me? By the way, you nearly landed right in the soup, lad. That Protokin—he's the chief of the militia. It was a good job he didn't wake you yesterday. You wouldn't have talked your way out of that. He's as sharp as a razor."

The young man said nothing and stood looking at Nikitich.

"He'd want to know where you were from, where you were going. Papers wouldn't help you."

The lad made no response.

"Well, off you go now." Nikitich slung the Tula gun over his shoulder and set off along the ride

towards the cabin. He had nearly reached the end of it when he heard what sounded like the deafening crack of a branch just by his ear. In the same instant several fists seemed to strike him in the back of the head and the shoulders and push him forward. He fell face down in the snow and neither heard nor felt anything more. Nor did he hear the snow being piled on top of him or a voice saying, "It's better that way, Dad. Safer."

...By sunrise the lad was far away from the ride. He took no notice of the sun, which was behind him. He looked only ahead.

The damp snow rustled faintly as it fell.

Gradually the taiga was awakening. The heavy scent of spring forest was overpowering and made one feel rather dizzy.

THOUGHTS

And so it went on every night!

As soon as a little peace descended on the village and people began to fall asleep—he started. Off he would go, the parasite, right from the edge of the village, playing that accordion. And it seemed to be a special kind of accordion—the bawling kind. It didn't sing, it bawled.

People advised Ninka Krechetova, "For goodness sake, get married to him soon! Or he'll make life hell for us."

Ninka would smile mysteriously.

"You don't have to listen to him. Go to sleep."

"How can we sleep with that thing bellowing under our windows? If he'd only go down to the river, the blessed fool, but he will stay up here. He must be doing it on purpose."

Kolka Malashkin himself, a thick-lipped giant of a fellow, only narrowed his little eyes impudently and declared, "I have the right. There's no law against it."

The house of Matvei Ryazantsev, the local collective-farm chairman, stood just at the spot where Kolka came out of a side-lane into the village street. So the bellowing of the accordion could be heard all down the lane, then rounded the house and continued to be heard long afterwards.

As soon as the first notes floated down the lane, Matvei would sit up in bed, lower his feet to the cool floor and say, "That's that. Tomorrow I'll

expel him from the collective farm. I'll pick on something and get him expelled."

Every night he said the same thing. But no expulsion followed. Only if he happened to meet Kolka during the day, he would ask, "How much longer are you going to be roaming around in the middle of the night? People need rest after their day's work, and you wake them up, you bell-ringer!"

"I have the right," Kolka would reply as usual.

"I'll show you your rights!"

And that was all. That ended the conversation.

But every night Matvei, sitting on his bed, vowed, "I'll expel him tomorrow."

And after that he would sit for a long time, thinking. He would still be sitting there long after the sounds of the accordion had died away down the street. He would grope for his trousers on the chair, take the cigarettes out of the pocket and light up.

"Haven't you burnt enough tar for one day!" came his wife's sleepy voice.

"Go to sleep," Matvei would reply shortly.

What were all these thoughts about? Nothing much really. Just the old days coming back. Nothing definite, just a few hazy memories. But one night, when the moon was high and the accordion was playing and the pungent smell of wormwood was floating in through the window together with the cool night air, he clearly recalled a very different night. That night had been dark as pitch. He and his father and younger brother Kuzma had been out mowing about fifteen kilometres from the village, in the

foothills. And during the night little Kuzma had begun to wheeze; when he had been all sweaty during the heat of the day he had drunk some ice-cold water from a spring, and at night his throat had got "choked up". Father wakened Matvei, told him to catch Igrenka (the fastest of the horses) and gallop as quick as he could to the village for some milk.

"I'll get a fire going here and we'll boil the milk when you bring it. We'll have to do something for that throat or we might lose him altogether," said his father.

Matvei listened for the sound of the horses grazing, caught Igrenka and bridled him and, lashing his flanks with the hobble rope, galloped him to the village. And then... Now Matvei would soon be sixty, but then he was only twelve or thirteen and yet he could still remember that night. Horse and boy were one as they rushed through the black darkness. The night came at them, striking them in the face with the heavy scent of dew-damp grass. Young Matvei felt himself swept up in a surge of wild exultation; the blood was throbbing at his temples. It was like being in flight, as though he had left the ground and was flying. Nothing was visible. No sky, no earth, not even the horse's head. All he could feel was the rushing sound in his ears and the huge presence of the night moving towards him. He was not thinking about his sick brother. He was not thinking at all. He was rejoicing; every fibre in his body was vibrant. It was a rare moment of overwhelming joy.

Then came grief. He arrived back with the milk and his father with the little boy clasped to his chest was running round the fire and seemed to be nursing him.

"Come on, son ... what's the matter, eh? Hold out a bit longer. Wait for the milk. We'll boil up some milk right away and you'll soon be able to breathe again. Hold on, old chap... Here's Matvei coming with the milk..."

But little Kuzma was choking. When mother arrived after Matvei, Kuzma was dead. Father sat with his head clasped between his arms, swaying from side to side and uttering long, muffled moans. Matvei stared at his brother with surprise and a strange curiosity. Only yesterday they had been playing together in the hay, and now there was this strange bluish-white boy lying there.

...How queer that this damned accordion should have stirred up such memories. Why that night of all nights? He had lived a whole lifetime since then—marriage, collectivisation, the war. There had been all kinds of nights! But they had faded, dissolved into the past. All his life Matvei had done things that had to be done. When they told him he ought to join the collective farm, he had joined. When the time to marry had come round, he had married, and he and Alyona had brought children into the world. The children started to grow up... The war had come; he had gone off to fight. A wound had brought him back before the other men. Then it was "You've got to be chairman, Matvei, there's no one else." So he had become chairman of the farm. And somehow he had got into the way of it and people had got

used to him too, so here he was, still slogging away at the job. It had been work, work, work all his life. The war had been the same—work. All his cares, all his joys, all his sorrows had been connected with work. When he heard people around him talking about "love", for instance, he was rather at a loss. He realised there was such a thing as love in the world. He himself must have loved Alyona (she had been lovely as a girl), but as for saying he knew anything more about it than that—no. He even suspected others of putting it on. Singing songs about love, sighing and sobbing; even shooting themselves, so he had heard. It wasn't so much pretending as a kind of habit; people felt they had to talk about love, so they talked about it. But it was just because the time had come to get married! Take Kolka, for instance. Was he in love? Ninka, of course, had taken his fancy, a nice buxom girl like her. And it was time for him to get married, so he roamed about at night "serenading". Why shouldn't he? He was young, bursting with strength... It had always been the same. At least the lads didn't fight nowadays because of the girls. They used to before. Matvei himself had fought many a time. It was all part of the same thing—itching fists and energy to spare. You had to use it up somehow.

One night, when Matvei was sitting on the edge of the bed thinking like this, he could not help giving his wife a nudge.

"Here—wake up, I want to ask you something."

"What's the matter?"

"Were you ever in love? With me or anyone?"

Alyona lay very still, in complete astonishment.

"Are you drunk?"

"Certainly not!.. Did you love me or what was it —habit that made you marry me? I'm asking you seriously."

Alyona realised that her husband was not "loaded", but she took her time answering him; she didn't know either, she had forgotten.

"What's been putting these ideas into your head?"

"There's something I'm trying to get to the bottom of, darn it. Something's upsetting me ... like some kind of sickness."

"Of course, I loved you," Alyona said with conviction. "I wouldn't have married you otherwise. Look how Minka Korolyov ran after me. I didn't marry him though. But what's set you thinking about love in the middle of the night? Are you going soft in the head?"

"Go along!" Matvei was offended. "Go to sleep!"

"Mind you let the cow out with the herd tomorrow. I quite forgot to tell you. I'm going berrying with the women in the morning."

"Where?" Matvei pricked up his ears.

"Not on your mowing patches, don't worry."

"If I catch you trampling the grass down, it'll be a ten-ruble fine from each of you."

"We know a spot where they don't do any mowing, and it's red with berries. So mind you let the cow out."

"All right."

Well, what exactly had happened that night, when he had ridden to fetch milk for his brother? Why had it suddenly come back into his mind like

this? I'm getting stupid in my old age, Matvei reflected. Everyone does.

But the sickness in his heart would not be appeased. He would catch himself waiting for Kolka with that bawling "squeeze-box" of his. If he was not to be heard for longer than usual, he would grow worried. And he would get cross with Ninka. "Drat that young filly ... she must be keeping him!"

And he would sit waiting and smoking.

Then far away down the lane the accordion would begin to play and the sickness would break out in his heart.

But it was a strange kind of sickness, it was a pleasant one. Something was lacking without it.

And the memory of certain mornings also came back to him. He would be walking barefoot through the grass and it would be all beaded with dew. And the trail behind him would be a vivid green. And the dew would sting his feet. Even now the chill of it made him shiver.

Or else he would find himself thinking of death, that soon it would all be over. Not the fear, not the pain, but the surprise of it. Life would go on as usual, but he would be carried off to the cemetery and buried in the ground. Somehow it was hard to understand how everything could still be quite the same. Well, of course, the sun would still rise and set, as it always does. But there would be other people in the village, people he would never know. That was just beyond his understanding. Perhaps for another ten or fifteen years some people would remember a man called Matvei Ryazantsev, but after that... Yet he'd have

liked to know how they'd be faring. It wasn't a feeling of loss though. He'd seen the sun up plenty of times and he'd had his fling on holidays. He'd had some good times. No, he wasn't regretting anything. He had seen plenty. But just that thought that he'd be gone and others would still be around, and he'd be gone forever. Surely they'd find life emptier without him. Or wouldn't it matter?

"Bah!.. I really must be getting old."

His thoughts actually tired him out.

"Here—wake up," Matvei would nudge his wife. "Are you afraid of death?"

"The man's crazy!" Alyona grumbled. "Who's not afraid of the old Mower!"

"Well, I'm not."

"Then go to sleep. Why think about it?"

"Go to sleep yourself."

But as soon as he remembered that black overpowering night, when he was flying along on horseback, his heart would ache with such a poignant sweetness. No, there was something in life, something he would be terribly sorry to lose. Sorry to the point of tears.

Then one night he waited in vain for Kolka's accordion. He sat there smoking, but there was not a sound. He waited and waited, all for nothing... That night really took it out of him.

When it grew light, Matvei wakened his wife.

"What's become of our bell-ringer? I never heard him."

"He's getting married. The wedding will be on Sunday."

Matvei felt depressed at the news. He got into bed and tried to sleep, but it was no use. He just lay staring at the ceiling until sun up. He tried to remember something else from his past life, but nothing would come into his head. The worries of the collective farm took over again. Soon it would be mowing time and half the mowers were standing by the forge with their shafts up. And that squint-eyed devil, Filya the blacksmith, was out on the booze. Now he'd get topped up at the wedding, and that'd be a whole week wasted.

I'll have to have a word with him tomorrow. The next day, on meeting Kolka, the thick-lipped accordionist, Matvei eyed him sardonically.

"Well, my lad, so you've done your playing?"

Kolka grinned widely—from ear to ear.

"Yes, I've done it. I shan't be waking you any more of a night now. It's all over. I've cast anchor."

"Right you are then," Matvei said, and went on his way. What are you so glad about, you young bullock? he thought to himself. She'll soon take you by the horns, your Ninka. All the Krechetovs are that kind.

A week passed.

Still the moonlight flooded in through the windows and the air was pungent with the scent of wormwood and young potato leaves from the vegetable patch. And it was quiet.

Matvei slept badly. He kept waking up and smoking. Sometimes he would go out into the porch for a drink of kvass. He would walk out on to the front steps, sit down on one of them and

smoke. The whole village was flooded with moonlight. And it was terribly quiet.

HOW THE OLD MAN DIED

From the very morning, the old man's suffering was worse. He was seized by an agonizing exhaustion... He had been weak as a kitten for a month at least, but that particular day, there was a special kind of weakness. There was a spot of melancholy somewhere below his heart—a pathetic mood that made him feel like melting to tears. He wasn't exactly frightened; he was more surprised, for he had never experienced such a weariness before. From time to time, he felt that he was losing the use of his legs. He would wiggle his toes just to make sure. Then his left hand would suddenly go numb. But when he tried to move it, everything felt all right. God only knew how bone-weary he really was...

He bore it till midday, hoping he would get better or that the heartache would ease up at least and he would feel like smoking a cigarette or having a drink of water. Suddenly, he realized death was fast approaching.

"Look here, old woman..." he said to his wife, who was no spring chicken herself. "Look here... I think I'm dying."

"For the love of God!" exclaimed the old woman. "Why on earth are you thinking up such nonsense?"

"Could you take me down from here? I'm tired of lying like this," said the old man who was stretched out on the stove-bed. "For God's sake, get me down."

"I can't do it by myself. I'll have to get Yegor to help me."

"Yes, go and fetch him. Do you think he's home?"

"I saw him fiddling about in his vegetable garden. I'll go get him..."

The old woman put on her coat and went out, letting a frosty cloud of cold air into the house as she shut the door.

"It's winter, and my death will cause a heap of trouble..." thought the old man.

Their neighbor Yegor came in, cursing the bitter cold.

"Wait a bit, Uncle Stepan," he said. "Let me warm up a little, and I'll come get you down. I don't want you to catch your death of a cold from me. Are you feeling worse, or what?"

"Can't get much worse than this, Yegor. I'm dying."

"What's all the rush? Don't panic."

"Panic or not, this is it. Is it really freezing outside?"

"Oh, it's about fifty below," said Yegor, lighting a cigarette. "And there's not enough snow on the fields to cover a gnat's ass. That'll be bad for the crops, sure enough. They're trying to haul in some snow from other places for the fields, but it's a fool's errand."

"Maybe it'll snow again..."

"Not much chance of that. Well now, let's get you down from there..."

The old woman fluffed up the old man's pillow and smoothed the feather-bed. Yegor stepped

onto the bench by the stove and scooped the old man up in his powerful arms.

"Hold onto my neck, all right? That's it! You're light as a feather. Uncle Stepan."

"I've just wasted away this last month..."

"You weigh less than a child. Why, my Kolya is a good sight heavier than you."

Yegor put the old man onto the bed, and his wife covered him with a sheepskin coat.

"Do you want me to roll you some tobacco? Do you feel like a smoke?" Yegor offered.

"No, thanks. I don't feel like it. My God," muttered the old man with a sigh, "it sure is troublesome to die in winter..."

"Please, stop all that talk!" said Yegor earnestly. "You have to chase all those black thoughts away." He moved his stool closer to the bed and sat down. "You know, during the war, I got wounded pretty bad. I thought I was done for. But the doc said, 'If you wanna live, you will. If you don't then you'll die for sure.' I was so weak, I couldn't even say a word. But I lay there in that bed and thought: Why shouldn't I want to live? What a stupid thing to say...' So you'd better just relax and start thinking about how much you want to live."

The old man grinned wearily.

"Give me a drag," he said.

Yegor handed him a cigarette. The old man inhaled deeply and started coughing. He coughed for a long time...

"I'm so full of holes the smoke goes straight to my stomach."

Yegor gave a chuckle.

"Where does it pain you the worst?" asked the old woman, staring at her husband with pity which, for some unknown reason, was mixed with irritation.

"It hurts everywhere... I'm so tired, I feel like all the blood's been drained out of me."

The three of them kept their peace for a while.

"Well, I'd better get going, Uncle Stepan," Yegor said. "I've got to feed and water the livestock yet..."

"Well, go ahead if you've got to."

"I'll drop by towards evening to see how you're doing."

"Yes, you do that, son."

So Yegor left.

"You know why you're so weak? You haven't been eating anything, that's why," the old woman told him. "Maybe I should go get one of the hens and wring her neck. Then I could make you some broth. Chicken broth always tastes so good when it's fresh, uh?

The old man thought.

"Don't bother. There's no sense wasting a chicken on me..."

"Never mind the chicken. I want to do it if you think it'd make you feel better."

"Don't bother," the old man repeated. "I'd rather have half a glass of vodka. That might get my blood flowing a bit faster."

The old woman went over to the cupboard and took out a quarter-liter bottle. It was carefully corked. The bottle was a bit more than half full.

"I hope it won't do you too much harm."

"When did vodka ever do a body any harm?" the old man snapped with vexation. "You've been fussing about my vodka all your life, because you've never been able to get it through your thick skull that vodka is the best medicine of all. You're a bunch of dunderheads, the lot of you."

"Just don't get started!" the old woman replied, equally vexed. "You and your dunderheads. One foot in the grave, and there you are mad as a wet hen. The doctor says you're not supposed to worry."

"Doctors are always saying people mustn't die either. But they keep on dying."

The old woman poured half a glass of vodka and handed it to the old man. He took a sip and nearly choked on it. The alcohol dribbled from his lips. He lay motionless for quite a while then wheezed with difficulty:

"No, I guess there's a time a man should lay off the sauce."

The old woman stood staring at him with pity. She kept staring at him until she let out a sob, saying:

"Look here, old man... God forbid, but if you really do die, what am I going to do here all alone?!"

The old man kept his peace for a long time, staring sternly at the ceiling. It was hard for him to talk, but in fact, he wanted to start a good long conversation.

"First of all, try to get some old-age support from Misha. Tell him: When your father was on his deathbed, he said it was his dying wish that you look after your mother till the very end.' You

tell him that, and if the son-of-a-bitch doesn't do right by you, then take him to court. If he has no sense of shame, you'll have no choice but to do it. After all, you have to get by somehow. Write to Manya and say that boy of hers needs an education. He's smart as a whip and even knows the 'Internationale' by heart. Tell her, 'It was your father's dying wish that you give the boy an education.'" The old man was exhausted from the effort and fell silent, staring at the ceiling. The expression on his face was ponderous and stern.

"What should I say to Petya?" asked the old woman, wiping her tears away, for she, too, was in a mood to talk seriously and without any tears.

"Petya?.. Don't bother him, because he can barely make ends meet as it is."

"Maybe I should really make that chicken broth, eh? I'll ask Yegor to wring the hen's neck for me..."

"Don't bother..."

"Why? Are you feeling worse?"

"The same. Let me rest a while," said the old man, closing his eyes and breathing evenly. He looked a lot like a dead man just then, for the expression on his face was one of serenity and estrangement.

"Stepan!" the old woman exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"Don't lie like that..."

"What do you mean, 'like that'? A man's dying, and here she is telling him how he should lie. So tell me how...

On all fours?"

"I'll go get the priest so he can administer extreme

unction if you don't mind."

"He can go to the devil. Did he ever do me a good turn? And you'll give him that chicken for nothing. You'd do better giving it to Yegor so he'll dig me a grave. Who else would do it?"

"Oh, I'm sure somebody will..."

" 'Somebody...' And you'll be running all over the village like a chicken with its head cut off looking for someone to dig that frozen earth. Wintertime... Why couldn't it happen in the summer?"

"Are you sure you're dying? Maybe you'll get better."

"Better? Don't kid yourself... My legs are going numb... Oh God, it's hard," the old man sighed. "Dear God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

The old woman gave another sob.

"Stepan, try to keep your chin up. Remember what Yegor said."

"He doesn't know anything about this sort of thing! He's sound as a bell. Tell him not to die, and he won't."

"Well then, forgive me, old man, if I've done you any wrong."

"God will forgive you," the old man mouthed the oft-repeated phrase. He was about to say something important, but suddenly he broke off and glanced around, strangely disturbed...

"Agnusha," he muttered, "forgive me... I was just kidding. Look—there's somebody in the corner. Who's that?"

"Where, Stepan?"

"Over there!.." said the old man, rising on his elbow and peering in terror into the corner of the room closest to him. 'There She* is," he said, "sitting there all hollow-eyed..."

Yegor came in the evening...

On the bed lay the old man, his white nose sharp as a beak. The old woman was weeping quietly by his bedside...

Yegor took off his hat, stood a while, then silently crossed himself before the icon.

"Yes," he said, "Uncle Stepan felt Her coming before She got here."

*(*ln Russian legend and lore. Death is personified as a woman.-Tr.)*

A SAD TAIL

Ivan Petin's wife up and left him—and my, how she did it! She ran off with an army officer just like in a novel.

Ivan came back from a long trip, parked the truck in the yard, unlocked the door to his house, walked in, and found a note on the table:

"Ivan, forgive me, but I can't live with a turd like you any more. Don't try to look for me. Ludmila."

Glancing neither right nor left, enormous Ivan collapsed onto a stool from shock as if someone had dealt him a blow square to the forehead. Somehow he knew at once that this was no joke—it was the absolute truth.

Despite his infinite capacity to survive anything, Ivan didn't think he could bear this: he felt terrible, and there was a sharp pain in his chest... He was seized by such melancholy and longing, it almost made him burst into tears. He tried to think but couldn't concentrate. There was only the awful pain that gnawed continuously at his heart.

One brief but clear thought flashed through his mind: "Lordy, what a mess!" And that was all.

At forty-three, Ivan was pretty bald, especially for a village man, and he looked considerably older than his years. His laconic nature and invariable gloominess didn't bother him in the least. The only bad thing was that these features were invariably noticed by others. However, it

never occurred to him that a man should be judged by these qualities. No one could be happy day in and day out, and a body didn't necessarily have to have the gift of the gab. "Of course not!" that same Ludmila had told him. These words made him love her even more... But still he remained silent. "It doesn't matter," he thought to himself. "I'm not a political instructor after all!" But now he knew she really had been grieved by his taciturn and unaffectionate ways.

Then Ivan found out how the whole thing had transpired.

A small army unit commanded by an officer had turned up in the village to help the collective farm assemble an electric power station. They finished putting it together in about a week and left. A week, and no more! But by then, the officer had managed to assemble a family for himself, so to speak.

For two days, Ivan just didn't know what to do. He tried getting drunk, but that made things even worse, so he stopped. On the third day, he sat down and wrote an account of his woes for the local newspaper. He had often read stories in the papers of totally innocent individuals who had been wronged in one way or another. He also wanted to ask everyone how his wife could have done such an awful thing to him!

A SAD TAIL

This is how it was: I come home to find a note on the table. I wont say what was in it, but she

called me a thing or two, I'll tell you that much. Anyways I got sum idea what mite have posessed her to do such a thing. Everbody used to say she looked like some actress or other. I dont recollekt which one. But ignorent littel fool that she was, she didn't realize it didnt mater. No mater who she lookd like theres no excust for what she done. It dont take the brains of a flee to go makin a ass outa yersef. Whenever anybody was to say who she lookd like, why sheed git happyer then a junebug in May. She hersef admited afore God an everbody that wuz the reeson she begun goin to them nite classes at the villege skool. But if you wuz to tell sombody he lookd jus like Hitler, what wud he be supposd to do? Git hissef a rifel an go shootn up everbody he seed? We had us a pore soldier like that durin the War. The spittin image of Hitler. They finaly had to send him to the rear sumwhers, cuz we cuddn have nonna that. But no, this un had to git to the big citey. I'll bee faimus ther. Everbudy wil rekogniz me. The littel fool! Shees no more feebelminded then the next one, tru enuff. But shes a littel stuk on her looks. Therz pleny purty wimmin aroun, but you dont see nonna them a runnin off from home! I no jus what he told her. He sed: "Well if you dont look jus like sum actress I once seen!" An thats all it took to git her up on her hi horse. The guverment dun spent lots a money ejukatin and ejukatin youall. An now you dun gone an becum a burdin to sosiety! An that when the guverment is losin money hand over fist.

Ivan put the pen with which he had written those searing words, rose, and paced about the cottage. He liked what he had written so far but didn't think there was any reason to bring the government into it, so he sat back down and crossed out that part. Then he continued:

Who do you think you are anyways? You probly think that jus becuz Im a truck driver I dont no nothin. But I can see rite thru the likes of you. These hands of mine do the guverment a letta good. The very hands Im ritin with. An iffn I wuz to see you I cud knock you upside the head so hard yud be laid up for a week. Mind you this aint no thret an I dont want you thinkin it is. But iffn we wuz to meet Id show you a thing or two for sure. Becuz what you done werent rite neether. Seen a hafway good lookin broud an had to make a pas at her rite off. I may be bald but Ive had pleny of chanses to do the same thing. Thereas a lot hapens out on the road. But I never done it. Mite a been sumbodys wife. Theres wimmin wuddn admit to havin a ol man at home. An jus what wud I be to that pore feller Ida done made a cukold outa? I dont wanna do nobuddy no harm.

Now jus look whats hapend. Shees done waggd her tale an gone runnin off God nos where. An shees left behin a brokin famly without no garantee the new onell work neether. Aint that so? Shee only new him a week. But me an her had lived togethr four long yeers. Dont that make her look plum stupid? An the guverment spent

pleny on her ejukashin. But what good did it do? The guverment never taut her to do bad. An I no her ma an pa too. They live in the next villege an they good folks. Her own brothers a army ofiser with the rank of firs lutenent but I never head a bad word about him. So how did she ever git to be so emtyheded? I cant beleev it. I done everthing for her. She had already wun a place in my hart. Ever time I wuz headed home from a long trip I wuz happy becuz Id git to see her soon. But what did I git for all of that but a big pare of horns? I mite have understud her losin her head over a smooth talkin feller that cud have any broad he wanted in ten minits. I cud have born that sumhows. But why did she have to run off for good? That I cant understan. It jus dont make no sence. A lotta things hapen in life. An it hapens that a body jus cant resist temtashin. But whyd she have to go an mess up everthing jus like that? Its eezy enuf to tare sumthing down but its a lot harder to put in back togethr agin. An shees alredy thirty years ol hersef. I feel real bad now an thats why Im ritin this tail. An come to menchin it I got three decorashins an four meduls. An I wudda bin the best modle communis truck driver anywhere in these parts sept for my one bad habbit. Whenever I git drunk I cuss like a sailer. I dont no what gits inta me. When Im sober Im a diffrent man entirly. But never once wuz I seen drunk drivin an thats sumthing Im never gonna do. Never once did I cus in frona my wife Ludmila in all the four years we wuz marryed. She can tell you that. I never sed a ruf word to her. An here shees done gone an made a

cukold outta me in front a God an everbody. Theres not a man alive wudnt take ofense at that. My harts not made outta stone neether.

Respecfuly yurs Ivan Petin.
Perfeshinal truck driver.

Ivan took his "sad tail" to the editorial office of the local newspaper which wasn't far away.

The fact that it was spring made him feel even worse: his heart was cold and bitter. He remembered how he and his wife had walked down this very street that led to the village club not so very long before. He would walk her home from her rehearsals, and sometimes he would walk her to them as well.

He hated the word "rehearsal" but never let on because his wife adored rehearsals, and he adored his wife. He liked walking down the street with her, for he was proud of her beauty. He liked spring as well—when it was only just beginning. But spring was already in full force—even the mornings were warmer. His heart was filled with a sweet longing. Spring was what he longed for, and it had already come—bare, muddy, and caressing—promising the earth that soon there would be warmth and sunlight. Spring had arrived, but he didn't feel anything but disgust.

Ivan carefully wiped his boots on the filthy mat of the newspaper office porch and went in. He had never been there before, but he knew the editor. They had met on a fishing trip.

"Is Ageyev here?" he asked a woman he had frequently seen at his house—another one who was forever running to the club for rehearsals. In any case, when he had chanced to overhear a conversation she was having with Ludmila, it had been all about "rehearsals" and "sets". Anyway, Ivan didn't consider it necessary to say hello to her now. His heart still hurt him too badly.

The woman looked at him with an expression that was curious and, for some unknown reason, quite merry.

"He's here. Do you want to see him?''

"Yes... I've got some business with him," Ivan replied, looking the woman straight in the eye and thinking: "I bet she's made a cuckold of her old man, and that's why she's looking so pleased with herself."

The woman stepped into the editor's office, came out, and said:

"You may go in now."

The editor was a short fellow—and just as jolly as his secretary... He was a bit heavier than he should have been for his height. Rolly-polly and bald like Ivan. He rose from behind his desk when the truck driver entered.

"Oh ho!" he exclaimed and pointed toward the window. "Time is working in our favor just now! The fish will be running soon! Have you tried out your spinner yet?"

"No," replied Ivan, trying to indicate with his entire appearance that he couldn't care less about fishing just then.

"I want to try mine out on Saturday," continued the editor, still in a cheerful mood. "Or do you

think it's too early? I just can't wait to get out on the river."

"I've brought you a tail," said Ivan.

"A tale?" asked the editor in surprise. "Did you write it yourself? What's it about?"

"It's all here," said Ivan, handing him the notebook.

The editor leafed through it and glanced at Ivan, who was staring at him gloomily and quite seriously.

"Do you want me to read it now?"

"That would be better..."

The editor sat down in his chair and began to read. Ivan remained standing, staring continuously at the cheerful editor and thinking: "His wife probably goes to those rehearsals, too. And I bet he doesn't even care—let her do whatever she likes! He can talk about all those 'sets' as well as anybody. He can talk about anything!"

The editor burst out laughing.

Ivan gritted his teeth.

"Listen, this is great!" exclaimed the editor, laughing so hard his resilient paunch shook like jelly.

"What's great?" asked Ivan.

The editor stopped laughing and even seemed a bit embarrassed.

"Excuse me, but did you write this about yourself? Did this happen to you?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm... Pardon me. I didn't realize that."

"It doesn't matter. Just keep on reading."

The editor turned his attention back to the notebook. He didn't laugh any more, but it was obvious that he was surprised, and he still thought it was funny. To conceal his amusement, he knitted his brow and pursed his lips in an understanding manner as he read to the end.

"Do you want us to print this?"

"Well, yes."

"But we can't print it. It isn't a story."

"Why not? I've read plenty of stuff like that."

"Why should you want this printed?" asked the editor, gazing seriously at Ivan with genuine sympathy. "What would you get out of it? Would it ease your pain?"

Ivan didn't answer at once.

"I want them to read it. There where they are."

"And where are they?"

"I don't know for the time being."

"But this is just a local newspaper. It isn't distributed anywhere else. They'll never see it."

"I'll find them and send it to them."

"No, that's not the point at all!" exclaimed the editor, rising and pacing about his office. "That's not the point. What do you think it will accomplish? Will it make her come back to you?"

"At least it will make them realize the wrong they've done."

"No it won't!" the editor insisted. "For the love of God. I don't know how to... I feel terrible about what's happened to you, but it would be perfectly idiotic to publish this, even if I were to edit it."

"Maybe it will make her come back."

"No!" the editor replied loudly. "Oh, for the love of God," he continued, obviously filled with

anxiety. "It would be better to write a letter. I could help you write it."

Ivan took the notebook and walked to the door.

"Wait a minute!" the editor called out after him. "Let's do it together—in the third person..."

Ivan walked through the reception room without even glancing at the woman who knew so much about "sets" and "rehearsals"... The shameless little hussy!

He headed straight for the tea-room where he bought half a liter of vodka. He gulped it down neat, without eating a thing, and headed for home filled with hollow gloom. He walked with his hands shoved into his pockets, glancing neither right nor left. The desired peace did not come. He wept silently as he went. The oncoming people looked at him in surprise... But he kept weeping and walking. He wasn't ashamed of his tears. He was tired.

QUIRKY

His wife called him "Quirky". Sometimes affectionately.

Quirky had one peculiar quality. Something was always happening to him. He didn't want things to happen to him and he suffered when they did, but he just couldn't help getting into scrapes—minor ones, but upsetting nevertheless.

Take the episodes of just one journey.

One summer he decided to spend his holiday visiting his brother in the Urals; they hadn't seen each other for about twelve years. He started packing.

"Where's that spoon-bait?" Quirky bawled from the storeroom.

"How should I know?" his wife replied.

"They were all here a little while ago!" Quirky tried to give her a stern look with his round, bluish-white eyes. "Now it's the only one missing."

"What does it look like?"

"It's for pike."

"I must have fried it by mistake."

Quirky said nothing for a moment.

"How did you like it?"

"What?"

"Did it taste nice? Ha-ha-ha!" He was no good at all at being witty, though he had a great desire to be. "Got any teeth left? It's made of duralumin!"

They were a long time getting him ready for the road— until midnight.

But early next morning Quirky was striding through the village with a suitcase in his hand.

"To the Urals! To the Urals!" he would reply when people asked him where he was going, and his round fleshy face and round eyes would express a couldn't-care-less attitude to long journeys—they didn't worry him. "Off to the Urals! Got to stretch my legs sometimes."

But he was still a long way from the Urals.

He arrived safely in town, where he was to buy his ticket and get on the train.

Having plenty of time to spare, he decided to buy a few presents for his nephews and nieces— sweets, gingerbread and so on. He went into a food shop and joined the queue. In front of him stood a man in a soft felt hat and, in front of the hat, a stout woman wearing a lot of lipstick. The woman was talking to the hat in a rapid, overheated half-whisper.

"Just imagine the rudeness, the lack of tact! I know he's probably got hardening of the arteries, but no one ever suggested he ought to retire. And then this new fellow-he hasn't been in charge more than five minutes—comes out with, 'Don't you think you ought to be retiring, Alexander Semyonich?' The cheek of the fellow!"

The hat gave the required answers.

"Yes, that's what they're like nowadays. What if his arteries aren't as good as they used to be. And what about Sumbatich? He was always forgetting his lines. And that other one, what's her name?.."

Quirky had a deep respect for all townspeople, or nearly all of them. He had no respect for hooligans and shop assistants, of whom he was a bit scared.

He reached the counter and bought some sweets and gingerbread and three bars of chocolate, then stepped aside to pack them all away in his suitcase. He opened the suitcase on the floor and, as he did so, his eyes wandered to the counter. Among the queueing feet lay a fifty-rouble banknote. There it was, the silly green thing, ignored by everybody. Quirky actually began to tremble with joy and his eyes sparkled. In a great hurry, so that no one should forestall him, he racked his brains for the wittiest and most amusing way of telling the people in the queue about the banknote.

"You're doing fine, citizens!" he said in a loud cheerful voice.

All eyes turned on him.

"People don't chuck money about like that round our way."

This got everyone rather worked up. After all, it wasn't just three roubles or five, but fifty—a whole fortnight's wages. And there was no owner.

It must have been the one in the hat, Quirky surmised.

He decided to leave the note in a prominent place on the counter.

"Someone'll soon come running in to claim it," the salesgirl declared.

Quirky came out of the shop in a very pleasant frame of mind. He kept thinking how wittily he

had handled the matter, '.'People don't chuck money about like that round our way!" Pretty good, eh? And then all of a sudden he broke into a cold sweat. The cash he had drawn at the savings bank back home had consisted of two notes—a fifty and a twenty-five. He had broken into the twenty-five roubles this morning and the fifty-rouble note ought to be in his pocket. He felt for it, but it was gone. He went through all his pockets—nothing there.

"It was mine!" he exclaimed aloud. "Hell's bells! It was my own money!"

He felt his heart turning over with grief. His first impulse was to go back and say, "Citizens, that's my banknote. I drew it at the savings bank yesterday: one twenty-five and one fifty. I changed the twenty-five just now and the other one's missing." But then he pictured how taken aback everyone would be by this announcement, and how many people would think he had decided to pocket it himself since the real owner hadn't shown up. No, he wouldn't be able to force himself to claim that rotten bit of paper. Besides, they might refuse to give it to him.

"Why am I like this?" Quirky reasoned aloud. "What shall I do now?"

He would have to return home.

He walked back to the shop, just for a last glimpse of the banknote from afar. He hung about near the entrance without going in. That would be too painful. His heart might not stand the strain.

On the way back in the bus, he kept swearing gently to himself—building up his strength for the forthcoming show-down with his wife.

They took another fifty roubles out of their savings.

Quirky, crushed by a sense of his own inferiority, which his wife had once again explained to him, was at last on the train. But gradually his depression passed. The train rumbled on and forests, woods and villages flashed by. Various people came in and out, various stories were told... Quirky told one of his own to an intellectual-looking comrade while they were standing at the end of the corridor, smoking.

"Something like that happened in a village near us. A silly fool grabbed a chunk of burning wood and started chasing his mother with it. He was drunk, you see. And there was she running away from him and shouting, 'Mind your hands! Don't burn your hands, son!' Evert then she was thinking of him... And he kept on running after her, the sot. After his own mother! Just imagine the rudeness, the lack of tact..."

"Did you make this up yourself?" the intellectual comrade asked severely, looking at Quirky over his spectacles.

"Make it up? Why? It happened in Ramenskoye, just across the river from us."

The intellectual comrade turned away to the window and said no more.

After the train journey Quirky still had an hour and a half's flight by local plane ahead of him. He had flown once before in his life. A long time ago. He climbed into the aircraft with some apprehension. Something's bound to go wrong with it in an hour and a half, he thought. But he got over his fears. He even tried to start up a conversation with his neighbour, but his neighbour was reading the newspaper and found it so interesting that he had no time to listen to a living human being. But the thing Quirky wanted to get to the bottom of was this. He had heard that you got fed on an air journey. But for some reason no one was bringing any food. He would very much have liked to eat in the air—just for curiosity's sake.

They must have kept it for themselves, he decided.

He looked down at the mountains of clouds below. Somehow he couldn't quite make up his mind whether it was beautiful or not. All round him people were exclaiming, "Oh, how beautiful!" But he had only a ridiculous desire to go plunging into them as if they were cotton wool. Why doesn't it surprise me? he wondered. There's five kilometres of nothing underneath me. In his mind's eye he measured out those five kilometres on the ground, and then stood them up on end to surprise himself, but he still wasn't surprised.

"The things man invents!" he said to his neighbour.

The latter looked at him, said nothing and rustled his newspaper.

"Fasten your seat belts!" a pleasant-looking young woman announced. "We are about to land."

Quirky obediently fastened his seat belt, but his neighbour took no notice at all. Quirky nudged him cautiously.

"They say we're to fasten our seat belts."

"Never mind," his neighbour replied. He put aside his newspaper, leaned back in his seat and said, as though remembering something, "Children are the flowers of life. They ought to be planted head downwards."

"What do you mean by that?" Quirky asked.

The newspaper reader gave a noisy laugh and said no more.

The plane lost height rapidly. Soon the ground was only a stone's throw away and racing backwards. But still there was no bump. As well-informed people explained later, the pilot had "overshot". At last the bump came and everyone was flung about so violently that you could hear their teeth chattering and grinding. The newspaper reader lurched out of his seat, butted Quirky with his bald head, did the same to the side window, then landed on the floor. Throughout the whole operation he did not utter a sound. And what astounded Quirky was that no one else did either. He, too, kept silent. They stopped. The first to come to their senses looked out of the windows and discovered that the aircraft was in a potato field. From the pilot's cabin a rather grim-faced pilot appeared and strode to the exit. Someone asked him cautiously, "It looks as if we've landed in the potatoes?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" the pilot retorted.

Their fears gone, the more cheerful passengers tried to jest. The bold newspaper reader was looking for his dentures... Quirky unfastened his seat belt and started looking too.

"Is this it?!" he exclaimed joyfully, and handed the denture to the newspaper reader.

Even his bald spot turned purple.

"Must you touch it with your hands?" he cried. •Quirky was taken aback.

"But how else?"

"Where am I going to boil it? Where?!"

Quirky could not answer that one either.

"Come with me," he suggested. "My brother lives here. We can boil it at his place... Are you afraid I've spread microbes over it? None of that stuff on me."

The newspaper reader stared at him in astonishment and stopped shouting.

At the airport Quirky wrote a telegram to send to his wife:

"Landed. A sprig of lilac fell on your breast. Never forget me, Grusha, my best. Stop. Vassily."

The telegraphist, a severe, unsmiling woman, read the message.

"You'd better word it differently. You're a grown-up person, not out of a kindergarten," she suggested.

"But why?" Quirky wanted to know. "That's how I write to her in my letters. She's my wife! Maybe you thought..."

"You can write what you like in a letter. But a telegram is for transmission. It's an open text."

Quirky rewrote the telegram.

"Landed. All's well. Vasyatka."

The telegraphist corrected two words herself. "Landed" and "Vasyatka". They became, "Arrived" and "Vassily".

" 'Landed'... What do you think you are—a spaceman?"

"All right then," Quirky said. "Have it your way."

... Quirky knew that he had a brother Dmitry and three nephews. But he had somehow forgotten the fact that his brother must also have a wife, who would be his sister-in-law. He had never seen her. And it was his sister-in-law who spoilt the whole holiday for him. For some reason she took an instant dislike to Quirky.

He and his brother had a drink that evening and Quirky started singing in his best tremolo style:

Poplar-trees, poplar-trees...

Sofya Ivanovna, his sister-in-law, put her head round the door and asked ill-temperedly, "D'you mind not shouting? You're not at a railway station, you know." And shut the door.

His brother Dmitry was embarrassed.

"That's because of the children being asleep. She's a good soul, really."

They had some more to drink and started recalling their young days, their mother and father...

"D'you remember?.." asked brother Dmitry joyously. "As if you could remember anybody in those days! You were a baby then. They'd leave me with you, and I'd start kissing you. You even turned blue in the face once. I got it in the neck for that. Then they stopped leaving me with you.

It made no difference: as soon as they turned their backs, I was with you again and kissing away like mad. A fine habit, to be sure. I was only a nipper, and even so, there was this kissing..."

"Do you remember?" recalled Quirky in his turn. "How you and me..."

"Will you stop shouting?" asked Sofya Ivanovna again, thoroughly bad-tempered and jittery. "Who wants to hear all your slobbering and kissing? Talking your heads off."

"Let's go outside," said Quirky.

They went outside and sat down in the porch.

"And d'you remember?.." continued Quirky.

But at this point something happened to brother Dmitry: he burst into tears and began thumping his knee with his fist.

"That's it, that's my life! Did you see? How much bitterness there is in the woman!.. How much bitterness!"

Quirky began reassuring his brother.

"Come off it, don't get upset. You mustn't. They're not evil at all, they're dotty. My woman's the same."

"What's she hate you for? What for? See how she hates you! But just what for?"

Only now did Quirky understand that his sister-in-law had taken a dislike to him. But why?

"Why, because you're just small cheese, you're not a boss. I know her, the fool. She's crazy about boss-type. But who's she? A canteen girl in the management, a bump on a level place. She gets an eye full of the bosses and then off she goes... She hates me too, because I'm a nobody, a yokel."

"What management?"

"In this ... mining... I can't get my tongue round it right now. And why did she have to get married? Didn't she know, or something?"

This caught Quirky on the raw too.

"What's it all about, anyway?" he asked loudly, not of his brother, but of someone else. "If you want to know, nearly all distinguished people came from the countryside. If you see a newspaper with a black border round the photo, read on and you'll find he was country-born. You should read the papers! If he's anybody at all, he left early to get himself a job."

"How many times have I tried to convince her: people are nicer and not so snooty in the country."

"Stepan Vorobyev. D'you remember him? You did know him, after all..."

"I certainly did."

"He was country-born if anybody was!.. Hero of the Soviet Union, if you please. Knocked out nine tanks. Rammed them. Now his mother's going to get a sixty-rouble pension. They only found out about it recently; he'd been posted missing, presumed killed..."

"And llya Maximov!.. We went away together. Knight of Glory, if you please. But don't talk to her about Stepan... You mustn't."

"All right. But that one ... what's his name...?"

The brothers went on talking excitedly for a long time. Quirky even paced round the porch and waved his arms in the air.

"It's the country, don't you see! Why, the air alone is worth a million! You open the window in the morning, and it bathes you all over. You could

even drink it, it's so fresh and fragrant. It smells of all sorts of herbs and flowers..."

Then they became tired.

"Have you done the new roof?" asked the elder brother quietly.

"I have." Quirky also sighed softly. "I've built a veranda onto the house. It's a joy to look at. You come out on to the veranda in the evening and you start having crazy thoughts: if mother and father were alive and you came visiting with the kiddies, we'd all sit on the veranda and sip tea with raspberry jam. We've got masses of raspberries now. Don't you have rows with her, Dmitry, or she'll make life impossible. And I'll try to be a bit more affectionate, and you just see, she'll come round."

"But she's from the country too!" said Dmitry, quietly and sadly amazed. "You know, she's tormented the children to death, the fool: she's been torturing one on the piano and she's put the other one down for figure-skating. It makes my heart bleed; but if I try to put a word in, she starts swearing at me."

"Hm!.." Quirky was excited again. "I just can't understand those newspapers. There's a girl, she serves in a shop, and she's rude to everybody. 'Hoy, you!..' But when she gets home, she's just the same. That's where the trouble is! Even I can't understand it!" Quirky thumped his knee with his fist. "I can't understand it. Why have they turned nasty?"

When Quirky woke up in the morning, the flat was empty. His brother had gone to work, so had his sister-in-law. The two older children were

playing in the yard and the youngest had been taken to nursery school.

Quirky made his bed, washed his hands and face, and started thinking what he could do to please his sister-in-law. And then he happened to notice a children's perambulator. That's it, he thought. I'll paint their pram for them! Back home he had painted the stove in such wonderful patterns that everyone had marvelled at it. He found a children's paint-box and brush and set to work. In an hour it was finished and the pram was unrecognisable. Across the upper part Quirky had painted a flight of cranes, lower down were all kinds of flowers and young grass, a pair of cockerels and some chickens... He examined the pram from all sides—it was a sight for sore eyes! Not just a pram, but a picture! He imagined how delighted his sister-in-law would be and chuckled to himself.

"And you talk about country bumpkins." He wanted to make peace with his sister-in-law. "The little lad will be like a flower in a basket."

All day Quirky strolled round the town, looking in shop windows. He bought a toy motor launch for one nephew, a lovely job, all white, with a little search-light on it. I'll touch this up too, he thought.

He arrived back at his brother's house at about six in the evening. As he went up the steps of the porch he heard Dmitry having a row with his wife. Actually it was the wife who was making all

the noise, while his brother kept smoothing her down.

"What does it matter! Let it pass, Sonya... Never mind..."

"He's got to be out of this house by tomorrow!"

Sofya Ivanovna was shouting. "I won't have that clown here another day!"

"All right, all right!.. Sonya..."

"Don't you alright me. I'll throw his suitcase down the stairs if he's still here tomorrow."

Quirky stepped hastily off the porch. But where was he to go from there? He felt hurt again. When people hated him he always felt very hurt. And frightened. It was like the end of everything. What was the point in living? And he wanted to get as far away as possible from people who hated him or laughed at him.

"What is it makes me like I am," he whispered bitterly, sitting in the garden shed. "I ought to have guessed she wouldn't understand folk art."

He sat in the shed until it was dark, still with the same ache in his heart. Then Dmitry came to the shed and was not at all surprised to find his brother there. It was as if he knew already.

"It's like this," he said. "She's at it again... That pram ... you shouldn't have done it."

"I thought it'd take her fancy. I'll go rightaway, brother."

Brother Dmitry sighed—and said no more.

Quirky arrived home during a shower of fine warm rain. He stepped out of the bus, took off his new shoes and ran over the warm wet earth, his case in one hand, his shoes in the other. He skipped along, singing loudly,

Poplar-trees, poplar-trees...

Half the sky was already clear and blue and the sun was hovering nearby. The rain slackened and the big raindrops dotted the puddles with swelling and bursting bubbles.

Quirky slipped and nearly fell.

...His name was Vassily Yegorich Knyazev. He was thirty-nine years of age. He was the village cinema projectionist. He adored detectives and dogs. In childhood he had dreamed of being a spy.

I BEG YOUR PARDON, MADAM!

Whenever city folks came to these parts to do a bit of hunting and asked the villagers who might show them about, they were invariably told:

"Go see Bronka Pupkov. He's good at that sort of thing. With him, there's never a dull moment." These words were always accompanied by an odd smile.

Bronka (Bronislav) Pupkov was still a strong fellow, well-built, blue-eyed and smiling, and a great talker. He was past fifty and had fought in the Second World War, but the two fingers shot off of his right hand weren't a memento of those years. Once, as a young fellow, he had been out hunting in the wintertime and wanted a drink of water. So he started pounding the ice by the riverbank with his rifle butt, holding the gun by the barrel with two fingers over the muzzle. The safety catch was on, but it snapped loose, and one of his fingers was blown clear off. The other was attached only by a flap of skin. That one, Bronka tore the rest of the way off himself. He brought them home—his index and middle fingers—and buried them in the garden. He even said the following words:

"My dear fingers, may you rest in peace until that bright morning when Our Savior shall return."

He wanted to put up a cross, but his father wouldn't let him.

Bronka had been a real hellraiser in his day. He was always getting in fights, and had been beaten up often and mercilessly. Whenever that happened, he would go home and lick his wounds until he was better, and the next thing you knew, he would be out tearing through the village on his deafening moped not holding a grudge against anyone, for he was an easy-going sort.

For Bronka, acting as a guide for hunters from the city was a real holiday. Whenever they came around, he was always willing to go with them for a week or even a month. He knew the area as well as he did his remaining eight fingers, and moreover he was a clever and lucky hunter.

The city folks weren't stingy with their vodka, and sometimes, they even gave him money. But if they didn't, well, that was all right, too.

"For how long?" Bronka would inquire in a businesslike fashion.

"Three days or so."

"Everything will be just dandy. You'll rest your nerves and get some exercise."

So off they would go for three or four days, or for a week even. And everything would be fine. The city folks were respectable. He was never tempted to rough them up or fight them—even when they were drinking. Moreover, he loved to tell them all manner of hunting tales.

On the very last day, when they were holding their farewell party, Bronka would launch into his favorite yarn.

He waited for that day with great impatience, steeling himself as best he could. And when the great and longed-for day finally arrived, there

would be a sweet pain in his chest from early morning, and Bronka would maintain a solemn silence.

"What's wrong with you?" they would ask.

"Nothing," he would reply. "Where do you want to hold the farewell party? By the riverbank?"

"That would do just fine."

...Towards evening, they would choose a cozy spot on the bank of the lovely, swift river, and build a campfire.

While the fish soup was cooking, they would down the first round and converse.

After Bronka had made short work of two aluminum cups of vodka, he would light a cigarette and inquire, as if in passing:

"Are any of you fellows veterans, by any chance?"

Almost everyone over forty was a veteran, of course, but he would even ask youngsters, because he had to get his story started.

"Did that happen at the front?" they always asked him, meaning his maimed hand.

"No, I was a medical orderly during the war. The world's 'a strange place, that's for sure," Bronka added, then fell silent for a long time. "Did you hear about the attempt on Hitler's life?"

"Sure we did."

"Not that one. Not the one where his own generals wanted to do him in."

"Then which one do you mean?"

"There was another one."

"You don't say..."

"Yes, my friends," Bronka began, holding out his aluminum cup and saying, "Fill 'er up,

fellows." He took a long swing and added, "There was another one. There certainly was. Whiz-the bullet missed his head by about this much." Here, he indicated the tip of his pinky finger.

"When was that?"

"The twenty-fifth of July in nineteen forty-three."

Another lengthy silence followed as Bronka again lapsed into reverie, as though he was recalling something quite distant but dear to him.

"Who fired the shot?"

Bronka didn't hear the question. He was smoking and staring into the flames.

"Where did the assassination attempt take place?"

Bronka didn't reply.

Surprised glances were exchanged.

"I fired the shot," he suddenly replied, speaking softly and continuing to stare into the fire for some time. Finally, he raised his eyes and looked at each of them as if he wanted to say: "Surprised, are you? Well, I'm surprised myself." Then he gave a gloomy laugh.

Usually a long silence followed while everyone looked at Bronka. He smoked and shoved burning coals back into the fire with a stick... This was the most intense moment of all—it was as if a glass of pure grain alcohol was coursing through his veins.

"Are you serious?"

"What do you think? I know perfectly well how history gets distorted sometimes. Yes, I do, comrades."

"That's a bunch of nonsense..."

"Where did it happen? How did you do it?"

"With a Browning. Just like this," he said, bending a twig as if he were pulling a trigger. Finally it snapped. Bronka looked both serious and gloomy just then—why were people so distrustful? He wasn't kidding around with them or playing the fool, after all.

The doubting Thomases didn't know what to say.

"So why doesn't anyone know about it?"

"A hundred years hence, there will be even more people that don't know. Do you understand? And what you don't know... The tragedy of it is that so many heroes remain unsung."

"That sounds like a bunch of..."

"Wait a minute. Tell us how it happened."

Bronka knew they wanted to hear his tale all the same. They always wanted to hear it.

"You have to promise not to tell anyone."

Another round of amazement.

"We promise not to tell..."

"Do you give your word of honor?"

"We won't say anything. Now tell us how it happened."

"No, you have to give your word of honor first. You don't know what kind of folks live in our village... They'll all be jabbering about it in a heartbeat."

"You don't have to worry about us. We'll carry your secret to the grave!" they exclaimed, itching to hear what he had to say. "Just tell us what happened."

"Then fill 'er up, fellows," Bronka said, holding out his cup. He looked absolutely sober. "As I

already mentioned, it was on the twenty-fifth of July in nineteen forty-three. We were attacking, you see. And an attack always meant more work for the orderlies. I must have dragged a good dozen people to the field hospital that day. I brought a badly wounded lieutenant into the ward. Some general was getting his bandages changed just then. A major-general. His wound wasn't serious—he'd gotten hit just above the knee. Well, that general saw me, and he says to me:

" Wait a minute, orderly. Don't leave yet/

"I thought he had to go somewhere and wanted me to help him get there. So I waited. Life was a lot more interesting with a general around: things always got done fast whenever one said the word."

His audience was all ears. The merry flames were sizzling and popping. Twilight was creeping from the forest toward the river. It rolled over the water and reached the middle of the stream where the current was swiftest. The water there still sparkled and shimmered like some giant fish with a long silvery body cavorting in the dusk.

"So they finished bandaging up the general, and the doc says to him: 'You should lie down and rest/ 'Like hell I will!' the general replied. We were mighty afraid of the doctors in those days, but the generals weren't. So anyway, the general and I climbed into his jeep and headed off somewhere. He asked me where I was from and where I used to work. He wanted to know how many grades of school I had finished. So I answered all his questions: I told him where I

was from (I was born in these parts, you know) and that officially, I worked on the collective farm, but that I really spent most of my time hunting. 'That's fine/ the general says to me. 'Are you a good shot?' 'Yes/ I said, keeping it short and sweet. 'I can snuff out a candle at fifty paces/ But I admitted I was a bit weak on the book learning, because my father had started taking me along with him to the taiga when I was still a tadpole. He said that didn't matter, because I wouldn't need a higher education there anyway. Then he says to me. 'If you can snuff out one rotten candle that's been starting forest fires all over the world, your homeland will never forget you.' Something terribly important was afoot, but I hadn't caught on yet.

"We came to a big dug-out. The general kicked everybody out and started asking me more questions. 'Do you have any relatives abroad?' he asked. I told him of course not. My kin had lived in Siberia for centuries. We were descended from the Cossacks who had build the Biya-Katun Fortress, which is not far from where we are just now. That was in the days of Peter the Great. And that's where my people hailed from—the pride of the whole village."

"So where did you get a name like Bronislav?" one of the hunters piped up.

"The village priest had a bad hangover when he christened me, and that's what he named me. But I gave that long-maned gelding a few thumps when we turned him over to the security unit of Dzerzhinsky's Cheka in thirty-three."

"What's that again? Where was it you took him?"

"To the city. We arrested him, but there was no one to take him in. So the other fellows said to me, 'Go ahead, Bronka. You've got a bone to pick with him after all. So you take him in/ "

"Why? Bronislav is a fine name, after all."

"Yeah, but you need a proper last name to go with it. My name is Bronislav Pupkov. Whenever we had roll call in the army, all the boys laughed their heads off when they called out my name. But if I had been plain old Ivan Pupkov, no one would have thought a thing of it."

"So what happened after that?"

"Anyway, this is what came next. Where did I leave off?"

"The general was asking you questions..."

"Oh, yes. Well, he asked about lots of things and then said: 'Comrade Pupkov, the Party and government are entrusting you with a very important mission. Hitler has come to the forward positions incognito. He is not far away. And we have a chance to eliminate him.' Then the general explains, 'We've taken prisoner a certain spy who was sent across the frontline to our side to fulfill a special assignment. He fulfilled his assignment but got caught red-handed. He is supposed to cross back over the frontline and deliver some extremely important documents to Hitler himself. Personally. The only catch is that Hitler and all his scum know this man on sight.' "

"So where did you fit in?" the hunters inquired.

"Hold your horses, fellows. Don't get me off track, or I'll never get to the point. And while

you're at it, slosh a little of that fire water into my cup here. Ha! So then I find out the reason: me and that spy look as alike as two peas in a pod. And then the fun really started, brothers!" Bronka lapsed into his reminiscences with such sweet abandon, with such fervor, that his listeners were also involuntarily caught up by this exceptional and pleasant sensation. They began to smile, and a certain quiet ecstasy took hold of them. "Right then and there, they gave me a private room in the field hospital and appointed two orderlies to look after me. One of them was a sergeant, mind you. But I says to him, 'Hand me my boots, comrade/ and he gives them to me. Orders are orders, you see, so he had no choice but to do what I say. They were getting me ready for my special mission. I was going through training..."

"What kind?"

"Special training. But I can't tell you about that, because I signed a paper saying I wouldn't reveal any secrets. After fifty years have passed, it's all right to tell. But only..." he paused in mid-sentence, and his lips moved soundlessly. "But only twenty-five have passed. But never mind! Anyway, the fun continued! When I got up in the morning, what a breakfast—three full courses! My orderly would bring me some port, and I would send him packing! So then he'd bring pure grain alcohol—there was plenty of it at the hospital. I took the spirits and diluted it to taste and gave him the port to drink. A week passed, and I wondered how much longer this would go on. Finally, the general sent for me and asked,

'Well, how are things going. Comrade Pupkov?' I told him I was ready. 'Fine/ he says.

'May God be with you. We're waiting for you to return a Hero of the Soviet Union. Just make sure you don't miss!' I told him if I missed, I'd be the worst traitor in history and an enemy of the people to boot! Either I'll die along with Hitler, or I'll return as Hero of the Soviet Union Bronislav Ivanovich Pupkov. The thing is, a big Soviet offensive was being planned with infantry on the flanks and a mighty head-on tank assault at the center."

Bronka's eyes were burning like tiny coals in the darkness. He even forgot to ask the men to fill his aluminum cup. The reflections of the flames played on his slightly wisened face with its regular features. He was handsome and taut as a bowstring.

"I won't tell you, my dear comrades, how they dropped me on the German side of the front-line and how I got to Hitler's bunker. The main thing is, I got there!" Bronka said, rising. "I got there!.. I went up the last step and found myself in a large hall of reinforced concrete. Bright electric lights were glaring, and there was a swarm of generals... I quickly took my bearings: where was Hitler?" Bronka was so tense his voice was cracking. He would speak first in a whistling whisper then in a grating, tormented howl. He spoke unevenly, pausing frequently in midword, swallowing his spittle...

"My heart was right here ... in my throat. Where was Hitler? I had studied this fox's ugly mug microscopically and had decided just where

to shoot. I was planning to aim for the mustache. I saluted and snapped: "Heil, Hitler!" I had a large, thick packet in my hand, and in that packet was a loaded Browning. One of the generals walked up to me and reached for the packet, but I gestured politely with my hand that, I beg your pardon, madam, it was for the Fiihrer himself. I barked out in perfect German: "For the Fuhrer!" Bronka paused to swallow. "And then... He came out. An electric shock ran through me... I remembered my distant homeland... My ma and pa... I didn't have a wife back then..." He always fell silent for a while, at this point ready to weep, howl, and rip his shirt from his chest... "You know how sometimes your whole life flashes before your eyes in an instant... Like when you're all alone in the woods, and you come face to face with a bear! I can't stand it!" he exclaimed and began weeping.

"So what happened next?" someone asked quietly.

"He walked toward me, and all the generals snapped to attention... He was smiling. I suddenly tore the packet open. Wipe that grin off your face, you rat! Now you're going to get it for all our sufferings! For all our wounds! For the blood of the Soviet people! For the cities and villages you've destroyed. For the tears of our wives and mothers!" Bronka was yelling and holding his hand as if he were about to fire a pistol. Everyone was feeling a bit peculiar by then. "You dared to laugh, but now you'll bathe in your own blood! You filthy, slithering snake!!" This last was a soul-rending scream. Then

followed the silence of the grave. And after, a hurried, almost inaudible whisper: "So I fired a shot..." Bronka's head collapsed onto his chest, and he wept in silence for some time, whining, grinding his healthy teeth, and shaking his head inconsolably. When he finally looked up, his face was covered with tears. Again quietly, very quietly, he said with horror:

"I missed."

No one said a word. Bronka's state of distress affected and surprised them all so much they felt it would be wrong to say anything.

"Fill 'er up, fellows," Bronka demanded quietly. He drained his cup, then walked down to the water where he sat by himself for a long time, tormented by the agitation he had just experienced. He sighed and cleared his throat, plaintively refusing to have any of the fish soup.

...Usually, the villagers would find out that Bronka had been telling the tale of his "assassination attempt" again.

After that, Bronka would come home gloomy, prepared to give and take offense in equal measure. His wife, an unattractive, thick-lipped woman, would take up the attack at once:

"Why are you coming home like a whipped dog with its tail between its legs? Have you been at it again!.."

"Go to hell!.." Bronka would growl limply in reply. "Give me some grub."

"You don't need food! What you need is a crowbar upside the head!" his wife shouted. "I can't even leave the house for shame at what people are saying about you!"

"So stay at home and don't go galivanting about!"

"No, I'm leaving right now!.. I'll go to the village council this instant. Let them call you in for another dressing down! If you don't watch out, they'll take you to court, you eight-fingered idiot! They'll put you in prison for falsifying history!"

"They don't have the right to: it's not down in print anywhere. Understand? Now quit squawking and give me some grub!"

"The whole village is laughing about you—behind your back and to your face even. But you could care less. You filthy cur! You louse! Don't you have any conscience at all, or did you blow it away along with your fingers?" With that, she spit at him and added, "You and your shameless eyes! You ass-hole!"

Bronka turned a stern gaze upon his wife and said softly but with considerable force:

"I beg your pardon, madam, but if you don't shut up, I'll knock ó our teeth in!"

His wife slammed the door behind her as she left. She was going to complain about her wayward husband.

She was wrong when she said Bronka didn't care, for he did. He suffered the torments of the damned and hated himself.

He would drink at home for a full two days, sending his teenaged son to the store for vodka.

"Don't listen to what anybody is saying there," he would tell his son angrily. "Just get the vodka and come straight home."

He really did get called into the village council a couple of times. There, the local officials attempted to shame him and threatened to take measures... But Bronka, who would be dead sober by then, without looking the chairman in the eye, would say morosely:

"OK, that's enough. The heck with it. It's not worth worrying about."

After the browbeating was over, he would "have a nip" at the village store and sit on the porch waiting for the drink to take effect. Then he would rise, roll up his sleeves, and announce loudly:

"Well, are there any takers? Of course, if I mutilate you a bit, don't take offense. I beg your pardon, madam."

And truth to tell, he really was a fine shot.

MEN OF THE SOIL

There had been showers during the night and a distant growl of thunder. But a brisk morning chased the sun out of the mists and liquid silver flowed through the trembling wet leaves. The mists gathered in the hollows, then unwillingly left the earth.

An old man knows how to think calmly about death. Only then is all the hidden marvellous and eternal beauty of Life reveals to him. Somebody wants him to take it all in painfully for the last time. And then go away.

They all do go away. And the sound of their going is as soft and slow as the jingle of warm bridle-bits in the mouths of weary horses. How good, how tormentingly good life has been. If only it were not time to go.

A grey-haired old man was walking along the wet road. He was on his way to mow grass for his cow.

The village had dropped out of sight behind the hills. He was making for the foothills. When you got to the top of one of the hills, the whole valley lay spread before you, walled in on three sides by silent mountains. A land of rolling green, where men had mowed grass for centuries.

On the "brows" and "manes" of the hills the grass grew as high as a horse's belly. The hollows were cool and the thickets at the bottom of them had a damp musty smell. Clear, cold springs bubbled out of the rich, rusty soil. Sweet water!

It made you want to sit there, in the chilly gloom, feeling sad and lonely. Of course, someone did care whether you were alive or dead. But all the same... Well, it was a mystery anyway. What was all this unbearable beauty for? What were you supposed to do with it?.. That was the pity-you just hurried by without noticing it... But then you came out into the light of day and you were sorry to lose your own sadness. It was as if something still and tender as the dawn had just entered your heart; you felt full of joy and wanted to keep that joy in your soul. But no, all kinds of thought came crowding in and you forgot to rejoice…

The sun was climbing higher. The mists rose and melted away. The earth steamed a little. But this steam did not obscure the light; it merely deflected it from the earth, lifted it a little higher.

The birch leaves had dried, but they still retained their freshly washed, youthful tenderness and were gleaming in the heat. Invisible birds were piercing the great stillness of morning with their song.

It grew steadily warmer. The heat came rolling down the hillsides into the still damp valleys and the earth smelled overpoweringly of its abundant green strength.

The old man walked faster, but not so fast as to tire himself. He was not so strong now; he had to husband his energy.

How often had he walked or ridden along this road-all his life. He knew every turn in it. He knew where to give a horse its head and where to hold it back, so that it would not waste its morning strength either and then be fagged out

for the rest of the day. He owned no horse now, but he could remember all the horses he had ever had. To anyone who cared to listen he could have described the character and habits of them all. His heart ached quietly when he thought of his horses, particularly his last. He had not sold it or bartered it, and it had not been stolen by Gypsies-he himself had ridden it to death.

It was in 1933. In those days he had been no old man, but a sturdy peasant farmer, Anisim Kvasov, or Anisimka, as people called him. Already a member of the collective farm, he had been given the job of patrolling the fields. But that year there was a famine. People were reduced to eating goosefoot and nettles; many did themselves great harm with the sweepings of grain left on the threshing floors through the winter. It was all a matter of somehow getting through the summer, of holding out till the next harvest. Everything depended on the cows; only their milk could save the children, whose bellies were already swollen

with starvation.

One day, also during the mowing season, the village herdsman, a feeble little fellow, wore himself out completely rounding up the herd and fell down in a dead faint. God knows how long he lay there—a long time, so he said afterwards; and meanwhile the cows roamed into the clover. Late at night he drove them back into the village, all swollen, and shouted to the first person he met, "Do something! They've been stuffing themselves with clover!" What a commotion there was then!.. The women started

wailing, the men grabbed their whips and rushed out to chase the cows about the streets. This was a disaster, and a great howl of grief went up all over the village. The cows staggered and fell, people collapsed from exhaustion. Anisim had a horse (when he had been put on patrol work the collective farm had given him the horse he had once owned himself, his own gelding Mishka); seeing what had happened, Anisim jumped on to Mishka and also started chasing the cows. They were at it all night, driving the cows about to help them overcome the effects of the clover, and at daybreak Mishka began to wheeze and his forelegs crumpled under him. Anisim did all he could, but there was no bringing the horse back to life. He wept and lamented over the dying animal. And after that he was charged with sabotage and spent six weeks in the local gaol. Still, it all blew over eventually...

And here at last was the old man's mowing patch: a gently sloping ravine, just off the road with a little marsh at the bottom, and a spring.

The sun was hand's breadth above the horizon now; he was a bit late.

After a hasty breakfast of bread and freshly salted cucumber, the old man adjusted his scythe and ran the whetstone along its blade.

There's no better work than mowing. And the old man liked mowing alone best of all. He could think of so much in the course of a day.

The scythe swung with a swish and a crunch; the grass trembled and fell. Three paces away a snake raised its head, and wriggled off through the grass, its supple, repulsive body glittering.

And another memory: one day as a boy he had been riding along at a good canter. All of a sudden the horse had seen or sensed a snake and jumped aside. And Anisim had fallen clean off his horse, and landed on his bottom, right on that snake. He was "running" for a week afterwards.

Still memory continued to raise those days of cherished brightness from the depths of his past life, just as the pure springs well up in the murky waters of a still lake. Snakes... In those days there was old grandfer Kudelka in the village. He used to tell the children that for every snake they killed they would be pardoned forty sins. And if a snake was thrown into fire, they would see dozens of tiny feet on its belly. So the children set about redeeming their sins with zest. They burned the snakes and, sure enough, when a snake writhed in the flames it looked as if it had a multitude of little white feet on its gleaming underbelly. And all the children would shout, "There! There they are!" All of them saw the feet.

The old man mowed until dinnertime, when the grass had dried out completely. The sun was blazing down now and he felt as if someone had placed a hot pancake on top of his head.

"Thank goodness for that," the old man murmured as he looked back at the patch he had mown. He had cleared a good stretch, and felt well content with his morning's work.

He went into the little shelter he had prepared for himself some time ago, when he had come out to look at the meadow. Now he could have a good, unhurried meal.

The shelter was warm with a scent of withered grass. Somewhere a tiny insect was keeping up a piercing high-pitched hum; the hot stillness was full of the dry, tireless buzzing of the grasshoppers. From above came the silver trilling of the swooping larks.

Ah, how good it was! It's rare for a man to feel good and to know that he feels good. It's only when he feels bad that he thinks, "Well, somewhere someone is enjoying life." If we're enjoying life, we just don't think it may not be so good for someone else. When things are good, they're good, and that's all there is to it.

The old man spread a clean faded bit of cloth on the grass and laid out his cucumbers, bread and clean spring onions, then went down to the spring, where he had left a bottle of milk, firmly corked with a rag stopper. He leaned over the stream, supporting himself with his hands on the damp springy bank, and drank for a long time, but not greedily.-He could see the tiny light-coloured grains of sand darting after one another over the rusty stream-bed.

Just as if they were alive, the old man thought. He rose with an effort, picked up the bottle and returned to his shelter. And there on a stump by the shelter sat another old man, in a soft felt hat and with a stick between his knees. He was smoking.

"Good-day to you," the old man in the hat greeted him. "I saw there was someone here so I sat down for a rest. You don't mind, do you?"

"Why should I?" Anisim replied, "Come inside. It's not quite so hot in here."

"Yes, it's a scorcher today." The old man in the hat joined him in the shelter and sat down on the grass. "Pretty hot, eh?"

Those good trousers of his will be all green, Anisim thought to himself.

"Take a bite with me, if you feel like it," he suggested.

"No thanks, I had a meal not long ago." The old man in the hat stared so hard at Anisim that he felt uneasy for a moment. "Are you mowing?"

"Has to be done. You're a stranger in these parts, I see?"

"No, I'm a local man."

Anisim glanced at his guest and said nothing.

"I don't look it, eh?"

"Why not? We've got all kinds now." As Anisim munched a cucumber, he saw his guest's glance stray to the plain peasant fare on the cloth. Must be hungry, he thought.

"Have a bite," he said again.

"No, you eat it. You have a whole afternoon's work to do yet."

"There's plenty here!"

The old man from town took off his hat, revealing a gleaming bald pate, moved nearer, picked a cucumber and broke off a piece of bread.

"Have you got a newspaper?" Anisim asked.

"What for?"

"To sit on. You'll make your trousers green. That's a fine pair of trousers."

"A-ah... Never mind them. Cucumbers!"

"What about 'em?"

"Delicious!"

"You're a local man, you say... Where from?"

"Just around here."

Anisim couldn't believe that his guest was a man from these parts. He certainly didn't look like one.

"I don't live here now. I was born here."

"A-ah. Just come for a visit like?"

"Had to see my homeland... Won't have the chance much longer. What village are you from?"

"Lebyazhye. Down this road."

"Are you just with your old woman?" ; "Uh-huh."

"Got any children?"

"Yes, three. And two more were killed in the war."

"Where are the three? In town?"

"Kolka in town. The girls are married... One's in Cheburlak. She's married to a team-leader on the collective farm there. The other's a bit farther off." He didn't say that his other daughter's husband was not a Russian. "Ninka was here last spring... Her kiddies are quite big now."

"And what town is Kolka in?"

"Well, he's sometimes in town, and sometimes he isn't. Always on the move. They're looking for metal."

"But what town is it?"

"Leningrad. He writes to us, sends us money sometimes... He's not badly off, you know. Keeps on saying he'll come and see us, but can't find the time. Maybe he'll come one day."

The old man from town drank a little milk and wiped his lips with a handkerchief.

"Thank you. That was good."

"It's nothing."

"Will you go and mow now?"

"No, I'II wait a bit."

"How old is Kolka?" Another question.

"He was born in 'twenty..." Only after he had replied did it occur to Anisim to wonder why his guest was asking all these questions. He gave him a look.

The other responded with a short laugh that was not particularly cheerful, but not sad either.

"Now I see," he said.

He's a queer fish, Anisim decided. He's too old to be fooling about.

"What's your health like?" the townsman continued his inquiry.

"Not so bad, thank the Lord... Headaches sometimes. Half our village has trouble that way, even the youngsters."

"Any of your family around? Brothers, sisters?"

"Not for a long time now."

"Dead?"

"My sisters, are. My brother never came back from the first war."

"Was he killed?"

"Must have been. That's the usual reason, isn't it?"

The man from town lighted a cigarette, and a blue wisp of smoke floated towards the entrance. Clearly visible in the green shade of the shelter, it vanished at once in the brightness of the open air, although there was not *a* breath of wind. The grasshoppers buzzed, the birds twittered in the bushes pouring out their endless song on to the earth's warm breast.

A ladybird was creeping up a tall stem of grass near the entrance to the shelter. It climbed steadily and without fear... The two old men became absorbed in watching it. The ladybird reached the very top of the stem, swayed for a moment on its tip, spread its wings and flew off sideways over the grass.

"So we've lived our lives," the old man from town said softly.

Anisim gave *a* start; the phrase seemed strangely familiar. Not the phrase itself, but the way it had been said. His father used to speak that way when he was thoughtful— with a kind of surprised little laugh, which he would follow up with an affectionate curse or two.

"Doesn't it make you sad, countryman?"

"Maybe it does. But what's the use?"

"There must be some help for a man at such a time?"

"Something ails you?"

"Yes. Regrets... I haven't had enough of life yet. I'm not tired. I'm not ready."

"Huh!.. When can you ever have enough of life? Who wants to lie there, in old Mother Earth?"

"Some people commit suicide."

"They're the ailing kind. A man can snap inside. He may look all right, but there's no life left in him. He's finished."

"I feel I haven't got to the bottom of things... Yet I know it's foolish. I've got as far as I could." The townsman was silent for a while. "It's this peace around here I regret... I've done too much rushing about. But you have to yield place to others, don't you?"

"Aye, that you do. Huh!"

"Wouldn't I just like to find a spot where everyone would forget about me, and then go on living there for another couple of centuries! Eh?" The old man laughed gaily. There was something disturbingly familiar in him, in that laugh. "Somewhere where everything would stay the same forever. Eh?"

"You'd get fed up with it, I reckon."

"I'm not a bit fed up with it now!"

"Don't think so much about it beforehand, then you won't be afraid. When it comes, it comes... You may be ill for a bit, but not long! People go under in a week."

"They do, indeed."

"You keep looking ahead, and I'm forever looking back. That's just as bad, only upsets you."

"Memories?"

"Aye."

"But that's good."

"Good it may be, but it pulls at your heartstrings. Why upset yourself?"

"It's good all the same. What memories do you have? Childhood?"

"Childhood mainly."

"Tell me some of them! Did you get up to a lot of pranks?"

"Grinka, my brother, did. He was a caution, he was." Anisim smiled at the thought. "Where it all came from?.. I expect he was the same in the war —always sticking his neck out..."

"What did he get up to then?" the old man from town asked with lively interest. "Tell me about it... Please, while you're resting."

"Huh!.." Anisim shook his head and lapsed into a long silence. "He was a smart lad, he was... One day our neighbour Yegor Chalyshev caught us on his vegetable patch. He thrashed us, of course, and with good reason. Those watermelons were still green and we'd have spoilt more than we ate. You can't see in the dark. You just bang one on your knee, then take a bite and, if it's green, throw it away. Aye. He laid into us, that he did. And father added some for good measure. That put Grinka's back up. And you know what he thought of? He took a pig's bladder—we'd just killed a pig—and rubbed it in ash... You know how they make 'em into balloons?"

"I do."

"Well, he dried it and blew it up and drew a terrible face on it..." Anisim broke into a chuckle. "I wonder where he saw such a mug! Then we waited till it was dark, crept quietly on to Yegor's porch and tied that bladder with string to the door beam... When Yegor opened up in the morning there it was, that awful mug staring him right in the face. The poor chap nearly fouled his pants. He slammed the door shut and locked himself in and started shouting up the chimney, 'Help! Help! There's a devil on my porch!'"

The old man from town burst into a roar of laughter and laughed till the tears came into his eyes.

"Gave him a proper scare, eh? Ha-ha!"

"Aye, after that they used to call him 'Yegor, devil on my porch!' And another time—when we were a bit older—in the mowing season too... There was a man called Mikolai Rogodin—

cunning fellow he was and a bit of a thief—one evening he says, 'Grinka, put a saddle on one of the horses—take mine if you like—ride back to the village and snatch a few chickens off someone. I feel like a nice bit of chicken.' So Grinka didn't think twice, saddled up a horse and off to the village he went. Before long he was back with five chickens with their necks wrung. We were pleased no end. Into the pot they went and what a feast we had! Mikolai praised my brother all the time he was eating. 'Good lad, Grinka!' he says. And then Grinka comes back at him: 'Eat up, Uncle Mikolai. Eat up, as if they were all your own!'"

Both the old men laughed heartily. The one from town lit another cigarette.

"He didn't half swear when he found out they were all his own! But what could he do? He was the one who had sent for them."

"Yes..." The old man from town dried his eyes, and fell into a muse.

Both men were silent for some time, each full of his own thoughts. The world outside the shelter buzzed and sang in the growing heat, and ever more prodigally and mysteriously exposed its beauty in the dazzling sunshine. "Well, I'll be getting on..." Anisim said. "Seems a bit cooler now."

"It's still very hot."

"Never mind."

"Do you have to keep a cow?"

"Of course."

Anisim picked up his scythe and swept the whetstone along the blade. His eye roamed over

the swathes of mown grass—he hadn't done so badly since morning. The old man from town watched him intently and sadly. "Well, I'm off," Anisim said again. "Right you are," the townsman assented. "Good-bye to you then." He looked straight into Anisim's eyes, said no more, shook his hand firmly and strode away up the slope towards the road. When he came out on the road, he stood looking round for a moment, then walked away and soon disappeared round the bend.

The old man went on mowing till late in the evening.

Finally he went home.

His wife—as he saw at once—had been waiting for him impatiently.

"We've had a visitor!" she announced as soon as Anisim appeared at the gate. "Drove up in a great long motorcar, asked for you. 'Where's your husband?' he says."

Anisim sat down on the doorstep and placed his bundle on the ground.

"Wearing a hat, was he? An old fellow?"

"Yes, a hat. And such a fine suit. Like a schoolteacher."

The old man sat staring at the ground in silence. Now he had recognised the strange likeness that had surprised him a few hours ago. Now he realised what it was. But could

it really be that?!

"Perhaps it was Grinka? Didn't you notice anything?"

"Heavens above! Are you out of your mind? Grinka?

Back from the dead?"

It's better not to talk to a woman about any vague

surmises you may have. She'll never understand. When she's young you can fill her stupid head with any nonsense you like and she'll believe you; but when she's old, you try to share a thought that's just struck you—you'll be the fool right away.

"Has he gone now?"

"Yes, he's gone."

Could it have been Grinka? Surely not?

The old man scarcely closed his eyes that night. By morning he had come to the conclusion that it was just a likeness.

Plenty of people look like each other! And why shouldn't he have admitted who he was? Maybe he hadn't wanted to cause a lot of fuss? He had always been funny as a boy.

But could it really have been Grinka?

A week later the old couple received a telegram:

"To Anisim Kvasov.

"Your brother Grigory passed away on the 12th. He asked us to let you know. Kvasov family."

So it had been his brother, after all.

THE FATBACK

Yefim Valikov, who made high boots of thick felt for a living, took his new neighbors, the Grebenshchikovs, to court. And this is why.

Alia Kuzminichna Grebenshchikova, a plump young ninny, laid out her hothouse beds right next to the wall of Yefim's bath-house, which ran along the edge of the Grebenshchikov's kitchen garden. She dragged bushels of manure over to the beds and made a big pile. To make sure the manure was good and dry, she lit the drier cow patties on the bottom with a soldering lamp and heaped the soggier patties on top. Then she left the whole mess to smoulder overnight. And smoulder it did. It smouldered and smouldered until it finally dried out all the way, and then the whole manure pile caught fire. And so did the bath-house wall. By morning, the bath-house had burned to the ground, along with a couple of other sheds, including the woodshed. The wattle fence was gone, too...

But Yefim Valikov was especially upset about the bath-house: it was brand new—less than a year old. And in the winter, he rolled out the felt he used for making boots in that bath-house.

The explanation Alia Grebenshchikova offered was absolutely ridiculous: she pretended she didn't know anything about it and told the insurance agent the manure had caught on fire by itself.

"All by itself—spontaneous combustion!" she affirmed and shook her finger at Yefim and the insurance agent. "Don't you see?"

That "spontaneous combustion" of hers finally made the insurance agent lose his temper, too.

"Take them to court, Yefim," he said. "We wouldn't want anyone to think we were foolish enough to believe such a tale."

So Valikov filed suit. But since such affairs invariably proved tiresome and were therefore disapproved of in the village, Yefim went around shaking his finger at everyone and explaining:

"I'd be more than happy to settle this thing peacefully, the way neighbors should. But she's too smart for her britches, that one! She keeps sticking to her tall tale of spontaneous combustion and won't let anyone say a word otherwise!"

Grebenshchikova's husband, who was an agronomist, was away at the time. When he returned, they had a talk with Yefim.

"Can't we settle things without having to go to court? We'll pay for your bath-house."

"Maybe you can settle things with her yourself. The Lord knows I couldn't. I need to go to court about as much as I need another hole in my head."

"She didn't do it on purpose."

"Nobody's saying she did. But why does she have to play the fool? Spontaneous combustion, ideed!"

"It can happen, you know, spontaneous combustion."

"But only if manure has been sitting around rotting for years on end—and in a big heap at that. But her compost combusted spontaneously in the course of a single night. That's simply impossible, my dear Vladimir Semyonovich, simply impossible!"

Truth to tell, Vladimir Semyonovich was afraid of his wife, and he was secretly glad his neighbor had already filed suit, because that way, there was nothing further to discuss: everything would be settled without his having to get involved.

"Sort it out yourselves." "We will."

Then came the day of the trial. The judge and the other members of the court from the regional centre had come to the village to deal with a more serious case and decided to settle the matter of the fire while they were there. Court was held in the village council building.

Yefim headed for the trial nervous as a kitten. He remembered how once, during the war, he—a disabled, demobilized veteran missing a leg—had gotten drunk and beaten Mitka Trifonov, the then chairman of the village council, with his crutch, and offered to give him all his war medals in exchange for the other's leg. He could easily have wound up in prison for a stunt like that. But Mitka himself "put the breaks on", and didn't file suit against him. But for a long time thereafter, he threatened Yefim jokingly: "Well, perhaps I should bring charges against you after all, old friend... What do you think?.."

"And now I'm the one who's about to drown someone else, it seems," thought Yefim. "But she drove me to it. If there had been any other way of

resolving the issue, I would never have filed suit against my neighbors." Then he recalled how the plump Alia Grebenshchikova had stared straight past him at the insurance agent when she was spinning her tall tale about spontaneous combustion as if to say, poor Yefim, he would never understand about spontaneous combustion anyway.

Yefim didn't put on his artificial leg. He used his crutches, so everyone would see he was missing a limb. But he didn't put on his medals, though. It was bad enough that he had raised such a stink about them that time with the village council chairman.

"On the other hand, if everyone goes around lighting fires wherever they like, I'll be left with nothing but my crutches. Or they might roast me like a pig with an apple in its mouth. So I'm clearly in the right."

Grebenshchikova was already at the village council.

She looked proudly at Valikov but said nothing —not even hello—and turned her back to her.

"Well, it looks as if the fine lady doesn't want to bid us good day," Yefim chuckled to himself. He wasn't exactly offended, but he wished someone would tell that lady outright: "What's there to be so proud of? First you burn down my bath-house, and then you go putting on airs."

The judge, a young man who appeared to be quite exhausted, examined his documents for a long time then looked up at Grebenshchikova and Yefim...

"Well, tell me what happened..."

Yefim thought he should probably begin.

"Well, this is what happened. This lady here..."

" 'Lady?' Are you enemies, or what? She's your neighbor, after all..."

"Yes, we're neighbors," Yefim hastened to add. "And I need this trial about as much as I do another hole in my head."

"But you filed charges nonetheless."

"Because she doesn't want to pay a kopeck! She burned down my brand new bath-house—anyone in the village will tell you that."

"How did it happen. Alia Kuzminichna?"

"I was laying out the beds for my hothouse, and I warmed up the manure a bit..."

"Did you set it on fire?"

"Yes, and it burned for a while, then I piled wet manure on top. Obviously, the whole pile dried out, and spontaneous combustion occurred during the night."

"Look here!" exclaimed Yefim. "You might say I was born on a dung heap! I've carried manure from here to there for years, and I know practically everything there is to know about it. And then, you shouldn't forget that around these parts, we dry dung and burn it for fuel every single year! I've carried so much compost from here to there, I can't possibly..."

"Comrade Valikov denies that spontaneous combustion of manure can occur. Just because it never happened to him doesn't mean it can't happen anywhere."

The judge looked at Alia Grebenshchikova and shook his head.

"But he can't deny the fact based simply on his own experience. He has to take account of scientific evidence, too," Alia Grebenshchikova continued.

The judge kept on shaking his head.

"Now she'll try to prove that I'm a camel," Yefim thought sadly.

"I understand that Comrade Valikov has suffered a material loss, but objectively, I'm not to blame. Lightning could have struck his bath-house and burned it down just as easily. My only mistake was to lay out my hothouse beds next to his bath-house wall, but it pokes out into our garden, so there was nothing criminal in what I did." Alia Grebenshchikova was well-prepared.

"I should have put on my medals," thought Yefim.

"I have expressed my condolences to Comrade Valikov, but this is all I could do under the circumstances."

The judge lit a cigarette and took a drag with obvious pleasure. Then, his face absolutely expressionless, he said quite simply:

"You have to pay for the bath-house. Alia Kuzminichna."

"Why?" she asked.

"What?"

"Why do I have to pay for it?"

"Are you really going to make your neighbor sue you? You should be ashamed of yourself, Alia Kuzminichna..."

Alia Grebenshchikova blushed.

"So you also deny the possibility of spontaneous combustion."

"The devil with that spontaneous combustion of yours. It was a perfectly ordinary fire, and nothing more. Not intentional, of course, but a fire nonetheless. That would take about five minutes to prove, and then you'll really feel foolish. Can't you and your neighbor work this out peaceably? How much was the bath-house worth, Valikov?"

Yefim was so overcome with gratitude that he hurriedly lowered the price sharply...

"Well, the bath-house was new, but I built it bit by bit..."

"Well, how much was it worth?"

"Two hundred or two hundred and fifty roubles more or less... If they'll just get the lumber for me, I'll rebuild it myself. The state farm has a truck, and they could ask the director... He surely wouldn't refuse..."

"It wasn't just the bath-house that burned as I understand..."

"The pressed dung I had stored up for the winter, an old shed... I'll rebuild the shed with the lumber that's left over from the bath-house..."

"Two hundred and fifty roubles, then," the judge decided. "I would advise you, Alia Kuzminichna to pay up peaceably so you won't shame yourself before the whole village."

The woman remained silent, looking neither at the judge not at Yefim.

"I can't pay you right away!"

"What a proud woman she is!" thought Yefim, feeling pity for her. Then he hastened to add:

"What do I need with your money? Just bring me the lumber for a new bath-house. And pay me

as much as I would have to pay someone to cut it for me... Sixty roubles or so for the work and twenty for food—say eighty altogether. And it doesn't matter to me how much you have to pay for the lumber. Maybe you can get it for free—I don't care in the least. And since you're both new here, I'm sure the director would give you a couple of truckloads of wood gladly. I'd have a harder time getting it myself..."

"Do you agree?" the judge asked Alia Grebenshchikova.

"I'll have to ask my husband," she replied sharply.

"He's not a bit like you," thought Yefim. "He doesn't have a stubborn streak a mile wide."

Yefim left the court in a good mood. He was dying to tell someone how things had gone, what a fine judge the young man was, how correct his decision had been, and how he, Yefim, had managed to say the right thing. He could hardly wait to get home.

Yefim's wife, Marya, could tell at once from her husband's appearance that everything had gone well.

Yefim boldly pulled a bottle from his pocket and started to tell her what had transpired:

"Everything is fine! The judge was a clever young fellow, indeed! He put that shameless hussy in her place right off. 'You should be ashamed of yourself!' he says. There's no such thing as spontaneous combustion! You set it on fire, so you have to pay for it!' "

"Imagine that!"

"He gave her such a hard time she didn't know where to turn for help. 'Can't you see your neighbor has only one leg?!' " Yefim always got drunk very quickly on an empty stomach. " 'If he were to write to the proper authorities about this, you'd really be in hot water. Do you know where his other leg is?' says the judge. 'He lost it in the battle for Moscow during the war! And here you are dragging the poor man to court! All he has to do is say the word, and you'll be nothing but skin and bones!' "

Marya realized that Yefim was exaggerating quite a bit, but the judge had said Grebenshchikova had to pay for the bath-house, and that was the main thing! For the rest, let him have his fun.

"So that means there is justice on this Earth after all!"

" 'Can't you tell this poor man fought at the front during the war?! You can see it in his eyes! And you with all your book-learnin'—do you realize who you've tried to tangle with? Have you no shame?' he says."

"Enough of guzzling liquor and rejoicing," Marya snapped angrily. "Instead of lolling around, you should get up off your behind and take that nice judge a big hunk of fatback. Then, when he gets home, he'll have some fine fatback from the village to feed his kids."

"To listen to you, one'd think the city stores never sold fatback..."

"Well, they did, but not like ours! Go cut off a nice chunk with lots of meat and take it to him before he leaves. And say thank you. You

probably hobbled off without even thanking the man. And after all he did for you!"

Yefim marvelled at the logic of the female mind.

"It came out pretty rotten, didn't it: the man did his best, and I didn't even thank him..." thought Yefim, then ruminated aloud: "He wouldn't have a drink with me, of course. After all; he's an important man around here, and people would talk."

"So take him some fatback."

"Sure I will. Nothing's too good for a man like him! Maybe I should take him some cash, too."

"He won't take money from you. He'd get in trouble if he did that. But you can give him the fatback. It's for his kids, after all."

So Yefim went down to the root cellar and cut off a generous chunk of savory fatback with lots of meat. What a wife he had!

"What will those damned women think of next?!" he mused.

He wrapped the fatback in a clean rag and hobbled off to the village council building, glad that now the judge would have something to be happy about, too.

"That's why life's so shitty sometimes," reflected Yefim. "You do something nice for the other fellow, and he up and disappears without a trace. So why can't the other guy do something nice for you, too, once in a while? After all, if no one ever repays you for the nice things you do, pretty soon you won't ever want to do anything good for anyone. And then we go around whining about how terrible life is! So try to do something

nice for somebody once in a while!" Yefim didn't care one whit about that stupid fatback, for instance. But it would never have occurred to him to take some to the judge. Yefim was pleased at the idea that he would appear so polite and thoughtful to the judge now. The cold sobered him; he always sobered up as quickly as he had gotten drunk. "So many smart people," he thought, "but none of them know how to live."

The judge was still at the village council, but he was about to leave.

"Could I trouble you for *a* minute, Comrade Judge," Yefim requested. "Let's go into the office... There's no one in there. Are you headed home from here?"

The tired judge (What made him tired, Yefim couldn't imagine. Being a judge didn't seem like hard work at all to him.) looked at him.

"Do you have any kids?"

"Where?"

"At home."

"You mean any kids of my own?" asked the judge, not

understanding what he meant. "Sure."

"Yes, I do, but why are you asking?"

"Then take this to them. It's real village fatback with lots of meat. City people like fatback with lots of meat. Out here in the country where we have to work hard, we like it with more fat than meat, but you folks are different." Yefim started to unwrap the fatback, but he couldn't get the rag off. He fumbled hurriedly, glancing back at the door. "You like your fatback nice and tasty. Why the devil can't I get this rag off ?!"

"Just what do you think you're doing?"

"I brought you some fatback to take to your kids." The judge involuntarily cast a glance at the door. Then he stared hard at Yefim.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" protested Yefim. "I told you it's for your kids."

"I won't take it," said the judge softly. "I didn't bring it to you because of this morning. That's all in the past. I just thought you could take it to your kids. There's nothing wrong with that. It's not money, after all."

"I won't take it! Now get out of here!" the judge snapped. With that, he turned around and left the office, slamming the door after him.

Yefim stood there, hunched over on his crutches, holding the fatback. The painful realization came to him that he should never have brought the fatback... Now he just stood there, staring at it in silence. He didn't know what to do.

The judge poked his head into the office and said: "Get out of here right this minute. There's someone coming! And wrap up that fatback so no one sees it! Hurry up!"

As soon as Yefim was outside, he knew what he should do.

"I'm going to take this fatback home and knock that worthless Marya upside the head with it!"

THE BASTARD

Spirka Rastorguev was thirty-six but looked about twenty-five, not more.

He was startlingly handsome; on Saturdays he would go to the baths for a good steaming, rip off the week's driving dirt, put on a clean shirt, drink a glass of vodka— and he was a young god! Clear, intelligent eyes, womanish lips blossoming scarlet on the brown face. Close-knit brows sweeping up capriciously, like a pair of raven's wings. But why, in the devil's name!.. Nature plays these tricks sometimes. What did he need it all for? He himself liked to say he was "easy" about it. He was "easy" about everything. Thirty-six years of age and no family, no proper home. He liked doing his own thing—getting his tongue round the wildest oaths he could think of and keeping lonely women company at nights. He went to them all, without choosing. That was another thing he was "easy" about. The older and uglier they were, the better he liked them— just to be bloody-minded.

"Spirka, you fool, don't spite your own face! What a one to pick on—lumpy Lizka, the face-grater! Haven't you got any pride!"

"It's not the face that counts," Spirka opined reasonably. "She may be a grater but she's a lot kinder than any of you."

Spirka's life had gone askew early. Things started happening to him when he was still only in his fifth year at school. The teacher of German,

a quiet, touchy old woman, a wartime evacuee, was bowled over by his looks.

"A little Byron! What an astonishing resemblance!"

Spirka hated the old lady ever after.

As soon as they started a session of *Anna und Marta baden,* he began to feel depressed. Off she would go again, "No, it really is astonishing!.. A perfect little Byron!" It got on his nerves. One day the old girl started off as usual, "Quite extraordinary, no one would believe it, a perfect little By..." But she got no further.

"By all the..." And Spirka let fly with a string of oaths that a drunken cobbler would have been ashamed to utter.

The old lady's eyes jumped onto her forehead. Later she said, "No, I wasn't shocked. I had been a nurse in 1914. So I have seen and heard plenty in my time. But what astonished me was—how could that one have got to know such words? And such a beautiful face! A perfect little Byron!"

"Byron" got a merciless beating from his mother. He stayed in bed till he felt better, then set out for the fighting front. He got as far as Novossibirsk before he was sent home. His mother gave him another ruthless beating, then spent the night wailing over her son. She had had Spirka by a dashing fellow of no fixed address, so she both loved and hated the young devil in the son. Spirka was a chip off the old block, even in character, though the boy had never set eyes on his father.

He would not go back to school, despite all his mother's cajolings and beatings. When he

threatened to jump off the roof on to a pitchfork, his mother had to retreat. And Spirka went to work on a collective farm.

He grew up into a brash, cheeky lad, disobedient and unruly, always getting into fights. In the end his mother couldn't take any more and just gave up.

"Just you wait, they'll stick you behind bars yet!"

And they did. After the war. He and a mate of his, as far gone as himself, held up a shop delivery waggon from the neighbouring village and took a crate of vodka off the driver, and even gave him—a grown man—something to remember them by. Then they threw a wild party at Spirka's girl-friend's place and that was where the police caught them. Spirka managed to grab a gun and ran to the bathhouse, where he held out for nearly two days, shooting at anyone who came near. They even sent in his girl-friend Verka ("Chatty Verka") to persuade him to give himself up. But that Verka took him a bottle of vodka and some more cartridges under her skirt. She was in there with him for a long time and when she finally appeared, announced proudly, "He won't come out!"

Spirka kept up his fusillade from the bath-house window, accompanying it with a song about the cruiser *Varangian:*

> *Our proud* Varangian *will never surrender.*
> *And no one for mercy will plead.*

"Spirka, every shot you fire means another year!"

"Mind you keep count then!" Spirka shouted back and blazed away from the window. When he sobered up, he began to feel desperately sleepy, so he threw the gun out of the window and came out.

He was "away" for five years.

He returned home just as wildly handsome as before, just as unruly and unexpectedly generous. He would astonish as much by his generosity as his good looks. He would give away his last shirt to anyone who might need it. Sometimes on a day-off he would drive out to the forest, work like mad, and come back in the evening with a load of fire-wood for someone old and lonely... When he had unloaded it all himself he would walk into the house.

"We can't thank you enough, Spirka, our good angel!" the old folk would fluster. "How can we repay you?"

And that made Spirka feel good.

"Gimme a glass of vodka," he would demand, and add complacently. "Well, I'm not such a bad egg, am I?"

But when Spirka came back from prison, his mates had all gone away and his girl-friends were married. People thought he would go away too, but he didn't. He enjoyed himself for a bit, gave all his savings to his mother, and took a job as a driver.

And that was how Spirka lived.

That spring two new people came to live in the village of Yasnoye, Sergei and Irina Zelenetsky, both teachers, husband and wife. Sergei was a physical education instructor. Irina taught singing.

Sergei was a stocky, broad-shouldered, muscular man with a springy walk, good at jumping and somersaulting. It was a treat to watch him practising seriously and enthusiastically on the bar, the parallel bars, the rings. He had an exceptionally broad and kind mouth, a rather fleshy and flattish nose, and big widely spaced, very white teeth.

Irina was small and pale, with a slim girlish figure. Nothing special to look at, but when she slipped off her raincoat in the common room and reached up on tip-toe to lift the heavy accordion down from the top of the cupboard—what poise, what grace. She was a sight for sore eyes.

This was the couple (they were both about thirty or thirty-two) that came to live in Yasnoye in the fine warm days at the end of April. Lodgings were found for them in a roomy house belonging to an elderly couple, the Prokudins.

Their first visitor was Spirka. He had a habit of coming to see new people. He would walk in and introduce himself, drink a glass with his hosts (Spirka drank, but was seldom drunk), chat with them for a while and take his leave.

So one evening Spirka had a wash and shave, put on his best suit and went to the Prokudins.

"I'll just drop in and see what kind of people they are," he told his mother nonchalantly.

The old couple were having supper.

"Sit down and have a bite, Spiridon." Spirka helped the old folk sometimes and they were fond of him.

"Thanks, I've just had mine. Are your lodgers at home?"

"In there." The old man nodded towards the front room. "Going to bed."

"What are they like?"

"Decent people. They gave us this cheese and sausage. Try some."

Spirka shook his head and went to the front room. He tapped on the door.

"Come in!" a voice responded.

Spirka went in.

"Hullo!"

"Hullo!" the couple answered together, and stared. People always did at Spirka. They couldn't help it.

Spirka made his own introductions.

"Spiridon Rastorguyev."

"Sergei."

"Irina. Won't you sit down."

As he pressed Irina's warm little hand, Spirka gave her the once over, quite openly. Irina frowned a little, then smiled, for some reason withdrew her hand quickly, and quickly went out to fetch a chair. When she came back she looked at Spirka not exactly with surprise, but with a great deal of interest.

Spirka sat down.

Sergei looked at him cheerfully.

"Welcome to Yasnoye," Spirka said.

"Thank you."

"I just dropped in to see how you were getting on," their guest explained. "The way people are here, you could go old and grey waiting for them to take any interest."

"Are they not sociable?"

"Like everywhere else—like to keep themselves to themselves."

"Are you a local person?"

"Sure I am. Siberian born and bred."

"Sergei, I'll get something to eat."

"Go ahead!" Sergei responded readily and gave Spirka another cheerful look. "We'll celebrate our house-warming with Spiridon here."

"Yes, we can have a glass or two," Spirka consented. "Where are you from?"

"Not far away."

Irina went to the old people's room. Spirka's eyes followed her.

"What's the life like here?" Sergei asked.

"The life..." Spirka paused, but not in search of words. He had felt a sudden regret that this little woman would not hear what he had to say about life. "Well, life comes in patches, doesn't it? First there's a good patch, then a bad one..." No, he really didn't want to talk at the moment. "Why has she gone out there? You've only got to tell the old folk, they'll get you what you want."

"But why? That's her affair. Well, what kind of patch are you going through at the moment?"

"Six of one and half a dozen of the other. Not so bad, on the whole..." No, he definitely didn't want to talk while she was out of the room, making that stupid "something to eat".

"Mind if I smoke?"

"No, go ahead."

"So you're going to teach here, are you?"

"Yes."

"What's she a teacher of?"

"Singing."

"Oh, is she a good singer?" Spirka asked with interest.

"She sings."

"Maybe she'll sing us a song?"

"You can ask her. She might."

"I'll go and tell the old folk myself. She's wasting her time out there."

He went out and they came back together. Irina was carrying a plate of cheese, sausage and fatback.

"I agreed not to cook anything," she said.

"Good."

"Yes, what the ... what for!" Spirka nearly came out with one of his usual qualifiers. "A cucumber and a bit of fatback-what could be better! Isn't that right?" Spirka glanced at his host.

"You know best," Sergei replied rather briskly.

Spirka noted that. That was all to the good. He missed the glances that the couple exchanged. He was in high spirits. Now they would have a glass of vodka, and then-well, then he would see what happened.

It was brandy not vodka that appeared on the table.

"I always have my glass right away, and that's it. D'you mind?"

Spirka was politely allowed the privilege.

He gulped the brandy and helped it down with a small piece of sausage.

"There we are!" he gave a little shiver. "That got down

to the permafrost, as they say."

Husband and wife drank a small glass each. Spirka watched the quiver in the woman's tender throat. And something—either brandy or blood—surged hot and heavy into his heart. His hands just itched to fondle that little throat. His eyes brightened, his glance became more intelligent, and he felt just grand.

"That's real fine brandy," he said approvingly. "But it's too pricey."

Sergei laughed; Spirka was not with him.

"What could be better than moonshine, eh?" Sergei asked. "Cheap and rough!"

"Now, what can I tell 'em to make 'em laugh?" Spirka was thinking.

"Not much moonshine about now," he said. "That was during the war..." And he remembered the grind of those hard faraway years, the belt-tightening, the ploughing that was too much for any boy... And he suddenly wanted to describe it in a funny way. He lifted his handsome head, looked straight at the woman on the other side of the table, and smiled.

"Shall I tell what kind of life I've had?"

Irina hastily averted her glance and looked at her husband.

"Yes, go ahead, Spiridon," Sergei said. "We'd like to hear about your life." Spirka lit a cigarette.

"I'm a brat," he began.

"A what?" Irina asked.

"A bastard. Mother brought me home in her apron. There was a smart operator round here

buying up skins— what they call a supply agent. And while he was about it he supplied me."

"Do you know him?"

"Never set eyes on him. He never appeared after he got Mum in the family way. Later he got gaoled and nothing's been heard of him since. Must have gone for the high jump. So that's the way I came into the world..." And just as suddenly as he had wanted to give a cheerful account of his life, he lost all desire to do so. It wasn't particularly funny. What could he tell them about —the labour camp? Spirka looked at Irina and that overpowering desire to touch her throat got hold of him again.

He stood up.

"Well, I've got to be on my way. I've a trip to make. Thanks for the drink."

"A trip at this time of night?" Irina said in surprise.

"Yes, we have to sometimes. Bye for now. I'll drop in again sometime."

Spirka went out without looking back.

"He's a strange lad," Irina remarked after a silence.

"Handsome, you mean?"

"Yes, he is."

"Handsome... And you know what—he's fallen for you."

"Has he?"

"And he's got under your skin too, I think. Hasn't he?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Oh, yes, he has."

"D'you want that to happen?"

"Why not? Only—you'd never cope."

The woman looked at her husband.

"You'd get scared," he said. "It takes courage."

"Oh, leave off," his wife said seriously. "What's the matter with you?"

"Courage and, of course, strength," her husband continued. "You have to be in good form, so to speak. He is. He'll cope. Incidentally, he's an ex-con."

"What gave you that idea?"

"You don't believe it? Go and ask the old people."

"Ask them yourself, if you must."

"Why not?"

Her husband went to speak to the old couple.

Five minutes later he came back and announced with clownish solemnity:

"Five years! In a strict regime camp. For robbery."

The damp evening air freshened his burning face. Spirka walked on, smoking. He suddenly wanted it to rain, a real downpour, with the sky all jagged with lightning and thunder booming overhead. Then what? Have a real good shout or something?

He set off for his current "pad"—to Nyura Zavyalova's.

He tapped on the window.

"Who's that?" the sleepy Nyura asked curtly, appearing as a dim white blob against the pane.

Spirka kept silent and thought about Nyura. During the war, when Nyura was about twenty-

three and had been left a widow with two little children on her hands, Spirka (he was thirteen at the time) had dropped a sack of grain into her kitchen garden at night (he was carting a load to town for milling). He had tapped on this same window and said in a quick whisper, "Have a look in your garden, by the bath-house... And hide it well away!"

Two days later, when he came to see Nyura again, also at night, she flew at him, "What d'you think you're up to, Spirka, you little snake. Do you want to get me into prison?! Want to keep yourself well fed by planting the stuff on others?"

Spirka was staggered.

"I didn't do it for myself! What are you all het up about?

"Who for then?"

"You. They've got to have something to eat!" He meant

Nyura's children. "They must be real hungry, I reckon."

Nyura went off into tears and started kissing and hugging Spirka. And Spirka, deeply moved, swore for all he was worth.

"Well, there you are... You can grind it yourself and bake some bread in hot ash. There's nothing tastier."

That was the memory that had come back to him all of a sudden.

"What're you standing there for?" Nyura asked. "The door's open... Don't wake the old folk."

Spirka stood and waited. There was a vein of mischievous curiosity in his character. What would she do next?

"Spirka!.. What are you playing at?"

Silence.

"Aren't you coming in?"

Silence.

"Oh, you silly loon! He wakes you up in the middle of the night, then starts his tricks... Well, go to the devil then!" And Nyura went back to bed.

Spirka crept silently through the first room, where Nyura's parents were snoring, and reached the front room.

"What are all the antics for?"

Spirka felt unbearably sorry for Nyura. Why act like this? It would have been better not to come.

"Forget it, Nyura. Let's sleep."

Three days later, Spirka called on the Prokudins in the evening. The lodgers were not at home. Spirka talked to the old folk while he waited.

Irina came in first, alone. So fresh-looking. And with her came the cool of the spring evening. She looked surprised and, so it seemed to Spirka, pleased.

Calm, resolute, he followed her into the front room.

"Bunch of flowers," he said, and handed her a flaming bunch of flowers.

"Oh!" she was even more pleased. "What lovely things! What are they called? I've never seen that kind before."

"Zharki." Something was singing gaily in Spirka's chest, as it always did when he was

about to have a fight or a woman. He made no attempt to hide his love. "I'll bring you more."

"But why should you?.. It's extra work."

"Oh what a job," Spirka countered playfully. "I'm always driving past, they're so thick you could mow 'em with a scythe." He reflected that it was a good thing, after all, that he had such good looks. Anyone else would have had the boot by now. He smiled, he felt on top of the world.

The woman also began to laugh, and then looked embarrassed. Spirka relished every moment. It was like drinking from a cool spring on a very hot day with your face in the water. He was drinking and drinking and an aching shiver ran through his body like fire. He took the woman's hand... It was like a dream—if only he would never wake!

She tried to take her hand away. Spirka didn't let it go.

"But why?.. Really, you shouldn't."

"Why shouldn't I?" Everything he knew, everything that had always worked unfailingly on other women he longed to bring to bear on this sweet frail creature. A prayer went up from his heart: "Lord, help me! Please, don't let her kick!" He drew the woman into his arms... He saw her eyes, very close, surprised, growing wider. Now don't waver, don't let go. "Oh God, all I want now is to kiss her—that's all, nothing more." And he kissed her. And fondled her white tender little throat... And again kissed those soft, yielding lips. Then her husband came in... Spirka didn't hear him, he only saw the woman's head jerk and the

flash of fright in her eyes... Then he heard a voice behind him, such a familiar voice:

"Scene as before. Enter husband."

Spirka released the woman. He felt neither shame nor fear.

He was just sorry—and riled at this well-groomed, straight-backed, self-confident man. The master! One of those lucky devils, everything under control, always welcome. He looked round at the husband. "Quite a lad, eh! Well, did you get very far?"

Sergei meant to smile, but the smile would not come. His eyes narrowed and the fleshy lips trembled resentfully. He looked at his wife. Why are you so quiet? And pale too?!" The fierce, angry shout lashed her like a whip. "You whore! So you did get somewhere!?" He stepped towards her.

Spirka barred the way. Close up he saw the fury and resentment burning in the schoolmaster's dark eyes. He also noticed the faint cool odour of Eau-de-Cologne from his clean-shaven cheeks.

"Keep calm," said Spirka.

The next moment a short strong arm plucked Spirka out of the front room.

"Come along, handsome!"

Spirka just couldn't do anything about that arm. It seemed to have welded itself on to the back of his neck and its strength was superhuman. It was like a piston rod propelling him along from behind.

Spirka was dragged through the old people's room; the couple stared at their lodger and Spirka in astonishment.

"I've just caught a dirty young Tom," the lodger explained.

Terrible things were brewing in Spirka's heart! A mixture of humiliation, pain, fury was choking him.

"What are you doing, you bastard!" he groaned.

They came out on to the porch. The piston went into action. Spirka flew down from the high porch and measured his length on the wet straw that had been spread as a door mat.

"I'll kill him!" the thought flashed through Spirka's head. Sergei walked down the steps.

"Get up!"

Spirka was up before the words reached him... And the next moment he was down again. And with disgust and horror came the realisation: "He's beating me up!" Again he sprang up and tried to duck under that dreadful piston— to get at the P. E. instructor's throat. But a second piston jabbed him hard on the jaw. Spirka fell over backwards with a taste of brass in his mouth. Once again he hurled himself at the schoolmaster. He was a good fighter, but fury, pain, humiliation and the feeling of not being able to cope with those pistons had robbed him of his former agility and control. Blind fury threw him forward again and again and the pistons worked with splendid efficiency. He didn't get near the schoolmaster once. Eventually he was knocked down and stayed down. The schoolmaster bent over him.

"I'll fix you," Spirka mumbled weakly, but seriously. "We shall consider that a lesson in good manners. You had better drop your prison habits." The schoolmaster's voice was mild, but serious too.

"I'll kill you," Spirka said distinctly. There was a nasty mess in his mouth, as if he had been chewing a bottle of Eau-de-Cologne—everything was cut and burned. "I'll kill you, remember."

"What for?" the schoolmaster asked calmly. "Remember."

The schoolmaster went back into the house, closed the door and bolted it.

Spirka tried to get up and couldn't. His head was buzzing, but the thoughts came clearly. He knew a way down from the roof of the Prokudins' house into the store-room. The store-room was never locked—just a loop of string over a nail, to stop the door opening by itself. The old people's room was never locked either and there was no lock at all on the door of the front room. He knew the Prokudins' house so well because their son, Mishka, had been a friend of his when they were kids and Spirka had often stayed the night there. Mishka was gone, but the old folk kept everything the same as before, of course.

At last Spirka dragged himself to his feet, clung to the wall of the house for a bit and stumbled away down to the river. Slowly his strength returned.

He washed his bruised face and struck matches to examine his suit and shirt. He didn't want his mother to see any signs of blood and get suspicious when he went in for the gun. Any

excuse would do for taking it. He could say he had a load of seed grain to deliver and wanted to do a spot of shooting by the lake on the way back. His mother was in bed.

"Is that you, Spirka?" she asked in a sleepy whisper from the stove.

"Yes. Go to sleep. I've got a trip to make."

"Have some fried potatoes, they're still hot in the stove. And there's milk in the porch. You must have something to eat before you go."

"All right, I'll take it with me." Quietly, without putting on the light Spirka took the shot-gun down from the wall, and for bluff's sake made a bit of noise in the porch ... Then he went back into the house (leaving the gun in the porch), reached up beside the stove, found his mother's head in the darkness and stroked her thin warm hair. Sometimes, when he was a bit drunk, he liked to caress his mother; so now it caused her no alarm.

"Been drinking, have you?.. How can you drive then?" His mother had come to love him more and more as the years went by. She was ashamed that he didn't seem able to get himself a family—always a loner, not like other respectable folk! Her only hope now was that some decent-living widow or divorced woman would come their way.

"It's nothing. I'd better go."

"Well, Christ be with you." His mother blessed him in the darkness. "Drive slowly, don't belt along like a madman."

"I'll be all right," Spirka was forcing himself to sound cheerful. He wanted to get away as soon as possible and somehow forget his mother. The

person it was hard for him to leave in this life—his mother.

He walked down the dark street, gripping his gun. He was still trying to throw off the thought of his mother. She'd never get over it. When they brought him in, with his hands tied behind his back, and when she saw him... Spirka quickened his pace. "Oh God, give her the strength to bear it," he pleaded. He was almost running and in the end he did run. And he was excited as if he was going in, not for the kill, but to jump into bed with Irina, all warm and willing. And he actually saw her in his mind's eye, but she suddenly disappeared. Those lips of hers, soft, half open, but he couldn't enjoy the memory because of the taste of blood in his mouth and ... yes, that was it, the Eau-de-Cologne chill from the schoolmaster's smooth cheeks. That scented cool came to him again now.

Spirka ran along humming to himself to keep his courage up.

Will my raven steed
Snap the bit 'tween his teeth?
Will my love...

The house was in darkness. "Aha, here we are then," Spirka murmured to himself. "Now we take a ladder... Up it goes... Quiet now." He climbed down safely into the storeroom and stood listening—not a sound. Only his heart pounding against his ribs. Keep calm, Spirka! No sound either as the string broke, except for the slight ping of the nail. Spirka reached forward with his

free hand and made his way silently through the inner porch, groped lightly for the door and found it. "Here we are..." He bent down, pushed his fingers under the door, lifted it as far as he could and pulled. The door opened with a soft pleasant "pah", and swung back soundlessly. The place smelled of old people, of damp sheepskin, the warm stove, dough... This was where he had been marched out by the scruff of the neck. Oh God, don't let the old folk wake up. His fear now was that someone might stop him... "What a bashing he gave me! He knows how it's done."

Spirka was surprised at his own ease and agility. He couldn't even hear himself. He found the door of the front room, lifted it from below. The door creaked. Spirka quickly and carefully closed it behind him—and he was there! In the darkness of the front room, slightly diluted by the light of a street lamp, the bed creaked. Spirka found the light switch and turned it on. Sergei was sitting up in bed staring at him. Irina also sat up. First she stared at her husband, then her glance rebounded from him on to Spirka and his gun. Her mouth opened soundlessly... Spirka realised that Sergei had not been asleep—there was too much understanding in those dark motionless eyes.

"I warned I'd fix you," Spirka said. He tried to cock the hammers of the shot-gun but they were cocked already (When had he done it?). "I told you, didn't I!"

Spirka was not disturbed by the fact 'that Irina was wearing only a slip and that one shoulder

strap was down and a firm white breast that had never suckled, was showing to the nipple.

The couple said nothing and stared at Spirka

"Get out of bed," Spirka commanded.

"Spiridon... they'll shoot you for this. Surely you "

"I know. Get up."

"Spiridon! But surely!. "

"Get up!"

Sergei jumped out of bed in his vest and pants.

Spirka raised his gun.

Sergei went deathly pale...

And suddenly Irina began to scream, and in such a terrible way, so loud and frenziedly, so urgently that it was not like her at all-such a small, clever woman with warm soft lips. It just didn't sound human, it was so bitter and despairing... She fell out of bed and crawled with outstretched arms towards him.

"Don't! Don't! Oh, please, oh, oh, oh!" And she tried to clasp the gun, still on her knees...

At that moment Sergei sprang open-armed at Spirka-and received a blow in the chest with the butt of the gun that floored him.

"Please, dearest... Oh, don't!" the little woman wailed It was as if she had forgotten Spirka's name. "0-o-oh!"

The old couple in the other room were also roused and crying out.

"Don't!" the woman kept screaming, shaking her head, trying to embrace his legs, crawling over the floor without her knickers on-her shirt was halfway up her back but she never even

noticed, she just kept trying to embrace Spirka's legs.

Spirka was dumbfounded. He pushed her away and then quite clearly he realised that if he pulled the trigger now there would be no forgiveness and no drink would ever drown the thought of what he had done. If only she hadn't howled like this!.. The strength she had in her!

Spirka swore... He walked out of the room and away from the dark house. Somehow he suddenly felt very tired. He remembered his mother and started to run. He wanted to run away from this thought of his mother, from all thoughts. He recalled Irina, kneeling there naked, and his heart burned with love and pity for her. And for a minute he was glad he hadn't fired the fatal shot... God, how she had screamed! And how she would have screamed and wept over her dead husband! Then back again to his mother... That was the one who would howl now! Spirka ran even faster. He reached the cemetery, and sat down on the ground. It was dark. He pointed the gun barrels at his heart, reached for the triggers, thought to himself, "Well... Is this all?" His fingers felt the two cold thin hoops...

"Now it'll knock me down," he thought again. Suddenly, he distinctly saw himself lying with his chest blown open and his arms flung apart; he was staring with blank eyes at the clear morning sky... The sun would rise and the fat, greedy, dark blue flies would start buzzing over his cold body. Someone would say, "We must cover him up. Like..." Ugh! Spirka shuddered. He sat down. "Wait a moment, my friend, wait a moment. Wait,

wait. Hold it, you clot, don't be in such a hurry! I ask you, what's the big idea? God!—you were given a walloping. Were you never thrashed before? What's the big idea?"

"What's the big idea?" asked Spirka aloud. "Eh?" Distastefully and apprehensively, he pushed the barrels away, took hold of the gun again and carefully put on the safety-catches. He sighed deeply, with joy. He began talking loudly, inanely, happily, with a great sense of relief.

"What's the big idea, Spirka? Eh? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! How could you? Did the little boy get a thrashing?.. He certainly did. It hurt, didn't it? You wanted to point the gun at your forehead and—pop!.. You're a right swank, you are!" Spirka even laughed and clutched at his lips: they had been split open by the schoolteacher's piston and hurt whenever he laughed. "What's this, what's this, what's this? (His smashed mouth said, "What fiff, what fiff, what fiff?") How can you? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! It's bad. So you got beaten... Now you want to ... to shoot. Oh, no, not that!"

Spirka lay supine on the cool ground and flung his arms apart... That was how he'd be lying there tomorrow. In the place where his heart was now beating-Spirka pressed the palm of his hand to his chest-there would be a jagged hole, bigger than his cap, blasted open by two shots. He might catch fire and his jacket and shirt would be burnt up. He'd be lying there naked... Oh, shit, what a sight! Spirka sat up, lit a cigarette and inhaled with pleasure. He'd been in such a hurry to plant those two charges in himself that he hadn't even

thought of having a smoke. Even those who're about to be executed, so Spirka had heard, ask for a last cigarette. He remembered a little girl, his niece; when she felt her father was tired of carrying her on his back, she would daringly screw her little face and say: "One more time! Just one more time!" Spirka laughed. He lay down again, smoked and looked at the stars; and it seemed to him that they were ringing as they twinkled, were ringing very, very faintly; and he wanted to whine, very faintly, like a puppy... He frowned and felt himself being smoothly and powerfully borne along by the earth. Spirka jumped to his feet. He must do something, he must do something definite. "I'm going to do something right now!" he decided. He picked up the gun and quickly walked off without knowing where he was going. Anywhere, as long as it was away from this cemetery with its crosses and its silence. He began swearing silently and without venom at the dead.

"Lying there, are you?.. Well, lie there-that's your lot. But what am I doing here? You're lying there, but I'm going to trot about on Earth for a little while yet. I've still got some buzzing around to do."

He now wanted to flee from his thoughts about the cemetery, about his having lain there... He wanted to run somewhere, to someone. To tell all, maybe... Perhaps have a bit of a laugh. And a drink! Only where? Fancy asking that! How about Vera, the drinks girl from the tea-shop.

Aha, she'd always got some booze in! He could spend the night there, too.

Spirka turned off down a side-street. Vera started grumbling at first. No rest for the weary... Spirka lit a match and let it shine on his face.

"Look, they nearly killed me and you're playing for time."

Vera took fright. Spirka laughed softly, pleased with the effect.

"Where did that happen to you?" asked Vera.

"Somewhere... Nice job of work?"

"My God, Spirka!.. They'll do you in one of these days. Where've you been?"

"Shan't tell you. It's a secret."

They went into Vera's room. Vera tugged the curtains closer together and put on the light. She looked at Spirka again... With the palm that was fragrant with cream she touched the hot grazes on his face.

"Ow!" exclaimed Spirka, shamming. He laughed again and began stomping round the room.

What wonderful people they are, those lonely women! For some reason, you always feel at ease and happy with them. You can stomp around at will, if the floorboards don't creak. You can think... You can, incidentally, caress your hostess, you can stroke her hand... Everything fits, everything's fine. They jump because they're so unused to it and they look at you tenderly, but quizzically. They're nice. They're kind-hearted. You feel sorry for them.

Vera found a bottle of vodka. She even went down into the cellar for some gherkins. But she looked frightened when she came back.

"What's that you've got there? A gun? I tripped over it..."

"It's a gun. Let it be."

"What d'you want a gun for?"

"Nothing special."

"Spirka, what are you up to?"

Vera's husband had been a good man. He had died at forty. God knows what had been wrong with him. Cancer, most likely.

"Spirka!"

"Yoo-hoo!"

"What are you doing... Have you been up to something! Are you in a flap?"

"Not half! See, I've been wounded." Spirka laughed again. Something was amusing him. It was good.

"You're a real crank. You haven't killed someone, have you?"

"No. I'll do that later. Afterwards."

"Spirka, I'm scared. Maybe you've done something bad... and I'll get involved as a witness... Get lost!"

"Everything's alright, you little fool. What are you frightened of? I haven't killed anyone. I was the one that nearly got killed... But I've still got to find a way to kill someone."

"Drink up and get out," said Vera in a fury. "Get out, Spirka. I've got enough trouble as it is without you."

Spirka turned serious.

"Take it easy. Do I really look as if I'd involve innocent folks? What's the matter with you? You know me, after all. I wouldn't have come if... Chuck it."

"Roaming about at night with a gun..."

Spirka gulped down the tumblerful and followed it with a gherkin. Vera didn't drink.

"I don't want any."

"Why?"

"I just don't. You've scared me with that gun of yours. Who beat you up?"

"Outsiders. Stop going on about it. Give over." He remembered the teacher... Pale, in his briefs. Spirka's shoulders twitched as he shook off an unpleasant, evil thought. His joy mounted. "All right, all right, all right," he said hastily. "Don't go on about it." He poured himself another half-tumblerful so as to stop himself thinking about the teacher's wife, so as not to remember her. But he did remember her—small, half-naked, frightened to death... In spite of himself, he remembered her.

In the morning, Spirka jumped out of bed early. He left the gun with Vera.

"I'll come for it this evening."

"Where are you going now?"

"To work, that's where... Anyway, don't babble about the gun, though..."

"I'll go and tell everybody that Spirka was here in the night with a gun..."

"Clever girl. Some outsiders beat me up... On the road. I wanted to catch them up with the gun, but I didn't make it."

Vera eyed him mistrustfully. But he wasn't even trying to seem particularly truthful. "Want a drink?"

"No. All the best!"

Spirka set off to call on the schoolteachers. He went by the curved side-streets, by the back yards so as to meet as few people as possible. Even so, he met two or three. He met collective-farm team-leader llya Kitaitsev. llya grinned nastily and knowingly at him from a distance.

"Oho! Been making a night of it, have we?"

Spirka also grinned broadly, mastering the pain that was lacerating his face all over, like needles.

"I have, llya! I've had a night of it. Give us a fag."

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing... Just had a fall." Shame, disgrace... Even the tip of his tongue had gone numb with shame, Ilya's insinuating smile cut his heart like a knife. "Are you going to give me a light, then?"

"I am, I am. You certainly had a fall... From high up, I dare say. How did you manage it?"

"Well, llya, these things happen. People fall. If I clock you one right now, you'll fall too. Or don't you think so?"

The smile vanished from Ilya's face.

"What d'you mean?"

"What do *you* mean by shooting your mouth off? You can't wait to get a snide word in, you slob. You can't say a thing without being nasty. Get out of my way."

No, he couldn't live in the village for the time being. He wanted to run to the ends of the Earth out of pure shame. All sorts of people would be smacking their lips over him... Oh, gym-master, gym-master... He'd learned to use his fists, that

one! With a vengeance. It'd be a pleasure to hang him by the heels from the ceiling... No, to kiss that wife of his in front of him... To kiss her and kiss her all over till it hurt, till she screamed. His savage feelings were driving Spirka on like a goad in the back. He didn't notice that he was hurrying again. But he knew that he wouldn't fly at the gym-master just now. No, that would come later... He would be calm. He would be terrifying. But that would come later.

Afterwards, when he recalled that morning's conversation with the teachers, Spirka had no feeling of satisfaction.

He turned up like a spectre in a nightmare stepping from behind a tree with an axe... He had stood on the threshold. The teacher was already dressed and shaved... He was still standing in front of the mirror with his electric razor. It was buzzing near his face. The schoolmistress, her face puffy with sleep and yesterday's screaming, was cooking breakfast, all white and delicious. She looked so tiny. She, too, froze with a plate in her hands.

"One word of warning," began Spirka in a matter-of fact sort of way. "Not a cheep about what happened between us here. Tell the old folks yourselves. I'm going to clear off for a while. But, Sergei Yurievich, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to work you over just the same."

"What d'you mean .... work him over?" asked Irina Ivanovna stupidly.

"I've had an advance payment... I've got to work it off." Spirka didn't know when this was going to happen, but he would come here one day

—composed, handsome, elegant, and would say, "I've come to square accounts with you!" And what sort of a situation it would be, and who Spirka himself would be, only the teacher would lose his nerve, he would become pathetic. And he would start begging, "Spiridon, I was a fool, forgive me..."

"Well, well," Spirka would say politely, "you don't have to shit your breeches straightaway. There's a woman here ... your wife, she must respect you."

"What advance?" Irina Ivanovna simply couldn't understand. "Who did you get it from?"

"He's going to get his own back on me. He'll get his revenge," explained the schoolmaster. "Very well, Spiridon, I've taken note of what you said." He got a grip on himself. "We shan't tell anybody anything,"

"That's the stuff... All the best for the time being." Spirka went out.

"But where am I going to clear off to?" he wondered. He even halted. Only now had he clearly realised that he had, in fact, decided to leave the district.

"But where for, where for?" As it turned out, he actually knew where for: the town of B-sk, about fifty kilometres away. He didn't know when he decided all this, but it had already been settled deep down inside him, but it was already active in him, living in him. Only his innate caution demanded that the decision should be verified.

After he had left the house, Spirka went to the garage. He had to go through it all over again: this time, it was the amusement in the eyes of the

drivers. He seethed inwardly and was nervous. He drew a voucher for a long-distance journey and quickly drove off.

He calmed down a little on the way. He began thinking. He wanted to relive in his mind's eye the delicious scene that had gladdened his eyes when he had been talking to the gym-master that morning. Polite and smartly dressed, Spirka would pay him a call... But the desired picture somehow failed to materialise. In exasperation, Spirka wanted to inflame himself so as to make the picture come to life. He would arrive... "How d'you do!" No... It didn't come off. It was disgusting to keep thinking about it all. It suddenly struck him, and he even refused to believe it of himself, that he felt no real and all-consuming bitterness against the gym-master. All those visions: the gym-master hanging upside down, or the gym-master, pale and pathetic, crawling at his feet— Spirka frantically wanted these pictures to become irresistibly desirable. Then he would probably be able to calm down and do it one day: hang the teacher upside down. After all, he must wish something for his deadly enemy. He must see him, even if only in his mind's eye, humiliated and crushed. He must! But... Spirka even began fidgeting in his seat. He realised that he could not find any evil in himself against the teacher. If it had occurred to him to think about his whole life, he would also have realised and remembered that he had never wished anyone any harm. The thought never occurred to him, but he resisted desperately, stirring up bitterness in his soul.

"Well, you swank!.. Spineless, that's what you are! You get kicked about like a dog, and all you do is... What a beating you got! He was laughing and playing around with you. He carried you. He trampled on you. Everyone's going to laugh at you now. And you, what are you? No woman'll ever let such softie into her place." There was no bitterness.

What was he to do now? Spirka couldn't answer this question. Then, during the day, he kept try ing to understand: "What am I to do now?" But he couldn't.

His personal life had suddenly become empty. It seemed monstrously devoid of meaning. Spirka was becoming more and more certain of this. At times he even felt dirty inside. Such a thing had never happened to him before. Calm overtook his soul, but a kind of dead calm, the calm of a man who is hopelessly lost in the forest, who realises it and sits down on a tree-stump. He doesn't shout any more, he doesn't look for a footpath, he just sits down and stays put, and that's that.

Spirka did likewise: he turned off the road into the forest, drove up into a glade, switched off the engine, looked round and then sat down on a tree-stump.

"A good place to shoot oneself," he suddenly thought calmly. "Blow the cemetery. At least it's beautiful here."

Beautiful it was indeed. Except that Spirka didn't make a special study of that beauty, but somehow absorbed it straightaway... And just sat there. He bent down, plucked a blade of grass, bit it between his teeth and began listening to the

birds. The little masters of the forest were whistling, squeaking and twittering somewhere in the bushes. A pair of handsome woodpeckers, beetle-wing black with white bibs on their chests, flew out of a thicket, took a fancy to a young pine-tree, ran down it from top to bottom, fluttered their red crests, tapped for a little while, found nothing, took off and skimmed away low over the ground to disappear into the bushes.

"Look at them, they fly in pairs too," thought Spirka. He also thought that people envy birds... Birds of heaven... You have to envy them. Spirka also thought that the gym-master had probably thrown out the flowers that Spirka had brought for the schoolmistress; they were lying under the window most likely and had started to wither... Such beautiful, crimson flowers. Spirka grinned. "You're a show-off, Spirka... There are little flowers here too. There they are: dark blue, white, yellow... That's a turkscap lily in flower, that's a lungwort... And that hogweed has put out some white caps." Spirka loved the fragrance of hogweed. He got up, plucked a stiff handful of tiny white flowers gathered into a dense, big circle in his hands, like a dish, buried his face in his hands and began greedily breathing in the cool, dryly acrid, marshy smell of the poor, unspectacular local blossom. He covered his face with his hands and stayed like that. He sat for a long time without moving. Perhaps he was thinking. Perhaps he was weeping...

...Spirka was found three days later in the forest', in the merry glade. He was lying with his face buried in the ground, his hands clutching the

grass. The gun lay beside him. No one could understand how he had fired. He had shot himself through the heart, but was lying prone... He must have somehow managed to get the gun out from underneath him.

They took him away and buried him.

There were many mourners. A lot of them were weeping...

The blacksmith Filipp Nasedkin, a quiet man well-respected in the village, who worked hard without complaining, had suddenly taken to drink. That is, he hadn't really taken to drink at all, he'd just begun to take a drop now and then. It was his wife, Nyura the Fuss-Pot, who decided that Filya had taken to drink. And she was the one who went rushing to the collective farm office and raised such a commotion that everyone else was convinced that Filya had taken to drink. And they all decided that Filya had to be saved.

The thing that alarmed them all most was that Filya had taken up with Sanya Neverov. Sanya was a very strange man, so eaten away by illness that his body scarcely hung together (pleurisy, a perforated stomach ulcer, a bad liver, colitis and God knows what else, as well as piles). He lived for the day and let tomorrow look after itself. He said so himself. He didn't work, of course, but he got money from somewhere. They used to meet at his place for a drink. He welcomed anyone who came.

Sanya's hut stood at the edge of the village, above the river, squatting backwards into the steep slope of the bank, and its two little window-eyes stared far off into the distance, across the

river to the blue mountains. There was a small fence, some old logs, two live

birch-trees... Inside that fence was a refuge for the weary soul.

It wasn't that Sanya knew such a great deal, or had seen so much in his lifetime (in any case, he didn't talk about himself, he didn't talk much at all), but he said the wisest things about life and about death... And he was genuinely kind. People were attracted by the warmth of this lonely, fatally ill man. You could sit with him for ages on the warm old log and gaze at the mountains in the distance. Your thoughts were gentle and your heart felt light, as though somehow you had suddenly grown huge and free, and reached out to embrace the beginning and the end of your life, as though you had taken the measure of something valuable and understood everything. What of if? Everything's fine! These were the thoughts that came to you here.

The married women hated Sanya from the very first day he appeared in the village. He had turned up that spring, picked out the old ruin belonging to some gypsies, haggled out a price, bought it and moved in. As usual, he was immediately christened the Stray. They were even a bit afraid of him. But they were quite wrong. When Filya was at Sanya's he felt as though he was holding in his cupped palms a weak sparrow, still warm, with little drops of blood on its broken wings—a tiny, trembling bundle of life. And Filya could feel every emotion he possessed, good and bad, welling up inside

him, whenever anyone said something bad about Sanya.

Filya told them what he thought at the collective farm office:

"He's alright. Lay off him. Don't bother him."

"A drunkard," put in the lady book-keeper, an elderly, but still attractive, social activist.

Filya glanced at her, and was astonished to realise that she still wore lipstick. Somehow he hadn't noticed it before.

"Idiot," he said to her.

"Filipp!" the collective-farm chairman shouted in a severe voice. "Choose your words more carefully!"

"I'm going to keep on going to Sanya's," Filya repeated stubbornly, possessed by a furious energy.

"Why?"

"None of your business!"

"You'll go balmy there! He's got a year and a half left at most, he doesn't care how he spends the rest of his time. But what about you?"

"He'll outlast you all," Filya said unexpectedly.

"Okay, perhaps he will. But why should you ruin your life with drink?"

"Just try getting me drunk," chuckled Filya. "You'll be broke in a week. Have you ever seen me really drunk?"

"That's always the way it starts!" they all exclaimed together—the chairman, the book-keeper, the young female agronomist and the foreman Naum Sarantsev, who was a great lover of a "gargle" himself. "It starts with the thin end of the wedge."

"That's what's so dangerous about this poison, Filipp," said the chairman, developing the idea. "It seems so harm less at first, it actually seems very attractive. Did you ever play cards in the bazaar after the war?"

"No."

"Well, I did. I was travelling back from the front, carrying a few bits and pieces with me—a P. Bouret watch, an accordion... I had to change trains in Novosibirsk. To pass the time I went to the junk-market, and I saw them playing the three-card trick. Come on, soldier-lad, they said, try your luck! I'd already heard from the other lads that they fleeched our kind. No, I said, you play without me. Come on, they said, give it a try! Well, I thought, what if I do lose thirty roubles or so?" The chairman brightened up. They were listening to him and smiling. Filya was twisting his cap between his knees. "Okay, I said. Only no cheating, you devils. What you had to do was guess one card... First he showed them to you, then he shuffled them as you watched and laid them out face down. All three of them. You had to guess one—say, the ace of diamonds. And he did it all while you watched, the swine. So he showed me the three cards face up, and asked if I'd remembered them. I said I had. Then watch!.. Quick as a flash he shuffled them this way and that. I followed the ace of diamonds. Which one is it, he asked. I put my finger on it... We turned it over, and it was the ace of diamonds. I'd won. They let me win another three or four times... And that was it. By evening my accordion and my watch, and my money had all vanished as if

they'd never existed. I lost everything. I tried to force them to give it back, but there turned out to be a lot of them. So I came back home empty-handed. That's the way any trouble starts, Filipp—you don't notice it. First they let me win, and then they cleaned me out. I wanted to win everything back, I kept on hoping ... and I got what I deserved. Vodka works just the same way: first I'll humour you, lull you into feeling safe, and then I'll set about you. So you be careful not to go too far, Filipp."

"I'm not eighteen years old."

"Vodka doesn't ask you to fill out any questionnaires! It doesn't care what age you are... You're a good worker, so far there's nothing wrong with your family life... We're just warning you. Don't go visiting that Sanya! He might be a good man, but just look at all the women he's upset!.."

'They'reall idiots!" said Filya.

"You're like a woodpecker hammering away at the same spot—idiots! idiots! Is your Nyura an idiot too, then?"

"Yes, my wife's an idiot too. Why kick up such a commotion?"

"Because she doesn't want her family broken up, that's why!"

"Nobody's breaking it up. She's running around breaking it up herself."

"You just be careful. We've warned you. If need be, we'll just throw your friend Sanya out of the village, that's all... That's what it'll come to."

"You've no right, he's a sick man."

"We'll find a reason! If he's sick, he shouldn't drink. Off you go to work, Fillipp."

"Did they call you in?" Sanya asked that evening, his left eyelid twitching nervously.

"Yes." Filya felt ashamed for his wife, for the chairman, for the entire collective-farm management.

"Did they tell you not to come any more?"

"They did… What am I, a child?"

"No, of course not," Sanya supported him. "Of course not." His eyelid was still fluttering. He was looking at the distant mountains, with an expression on his face as though he expected the sun to re-emerge from behind them, where it had set. "At night, around twelve o'clock, the nightingales sing. The little devils!.. They show off. Must be trying to impress each other."

"Trying to attract the females," Filya explained.

"They do it beautifully. It's beautiful. People can't do it that way. People use strength."

"So where's your strength?" Filya thought.

"I admire strong people," Sanya continued. "There was a lad who used to beat me when I was little—he was stronger than me. My father advised me to train by lifting something heavy, and in a month I'd be beating him. I started lifting the axle from a trolley. Did it for three days and rupture'd myself. My belly-button burst."

"If you were weaker than him you should have got a weight and tied it to a belt and bashed his head in with it. I used to be a quiet lad, too, and there was one boy who wouldn't leave me in

peace. So I gave him a belt with the weight from a clock, and then he left me alone."

Sanya was getting drunk. His eyes were growing misty... They wandered from the distant mountains to the river, the road, the wild raspberry bush under the wattle-fence. He began to feel warm and happy.

"It's so good, Filipp... I'm fifty-two, take away twelve years before I was properly aware—that's forty... Forty times I've seen the spring, forty times!.. And I've only just understood how good it is. I kept on putting it off, I never seemed to have time, I was in a hurry to learn as much as I could, I wanted to make as big an impression as I could... Now the brakes are on! I want to take my time to look at each spring and enjoy it. And it's a good thing I don't have many left. I understand so much now. Everything! It's not possible to understand any more than that. There's no need."

The cold was rising from the river below, but they could barely sense it drifting up... It was no more than a damp breath of decay, that was overpowered by the immense, calm warmth of the earth and the sky.

Filya didn't understand Sanya, and he didn't struggle to understand him. He felt how good it was to be alive, too. Life was good in general. He kept up the conversation out of politeness.

"Are you all on your own, then?"

"No, I have family, but I'm sick." Sanya was not complaining. There was not even the slightest hint of complaint. "And then I developed a liking for drink... I get in their way. It's only natural..."

"You must have had a hard life..."

"Not all the time. Sometimes I used a weight too... Sometimes they used one on me. And now it's the end. Or rather, not the end... Now I can feel infinity. As soon as it starts to get dark, and it's warm—I can feel infinity."

Filya could make no sense of this. There was another man there, Yegor Sinkin, wearing a beard because he'd been wounded in the jaw during, the war, and he could make no sense of it either.

"Did you spend a bit of time in jail, maybe?" Yegor inquired.

"Good grief, no! Now you want to make a convict out of me. I just lived without realising that life is beautiful. I had things to do... I loved art. I used to get excited all the time. But now I'm calm. I was an artist, if that's of any interest to you. But I was no artist really." Sanya laughed with a calm, happy sincerity. "Now I've really confused you... Don't worry about it. There are plenty of cranks and strange people in the world!.. My brother sends me money. He's rich. Not actually rich, but he has enough. And he gives me some."

This was something the men understood—his brother was sorry for him.

"If only I could start all over again!' Sanya's cheek muscles bunched tightly under the dark skin of his thin face. His eyes glittered feverishly. He was agitated. "Like I told you, now I know that man is an accident, a beautiful, agonizing attempt by Nature to become aware of itself. A fruitless attempt, I assure you, because nature includes my piles as well as me. Death!.. It's

inevitable, and none of us can understand it. Nature will never understand itself... It's furtous now, taking its vengeance through man. So furious..." The rest of Sanya's words were spoken to himself, mumbled under his breath. The men grew tired of straining to hear him and they began to talk about their own affairs.

"Love? Yes," mumbled Sanya, "but all it does is confuse everything and complicate matters. It just makes the attempt more agonizing, that's all. Long live death! Even if we're incapable of understanding it, it makes us understand that life is beautiful. And that's not sad at all... Meaningless, maybe... Yes, it's meaningless..."

The men realised that Sanya was already drunk. And they went off home.

Filya wandered through the dark lanes and alleyways, gradually dissipating the heat in his breast from the belief that life was beautiful.

All that was left was an agonizing pity for the man still sitting alone on the log... Mumbling indistinctly to himself something which he thought was important.

Sanya died a week later.

He died sober. At night. Filya was with him.

Sanya understood everything, and he realised that he was dying. But sometimes he drifted away, as though he had fallen into deep thought, and stared at the wall without hearing what Filya said...

"Sanya!" Filya called him. "Don't think so much. It makes it worse. Why don't you get up and walk around a bit? Let me walk you round the hut... Sanya?"

"Mmm?"

"Move a bit... Stretch your legs."

"Filipp, go and get a raspberry branch... It grows under the fence. Only don't shake off the dust... Bring it to me."

Filya went out into the night, and it deafened him with its immensity. The impenetrable spring night was dark and terrible ... huge. Filya had never been afraid of anything in his life, but he suddenly felt frightened... He hastily broke off a young raspberry branch, still damp with the night-time dew, and hurried back into the hut. He thought: "What dust can there be on it? There's no dust yet ... the roads are still muddy. How could there be any dust?"

Sanya raised himself on one elbow and stared fixedly at Filya. Waiting. Filya saw nothing but these eyes when he came into the hut. They blazed with pain, they implored, they called to him.

"I don't want it, Filipp!" Sanya said clearly. "I know everything... I don't want it!"

Filya dropped the branch.

Sanya, exhausted, dropped his head on to the pillow and went on in a quiet, hasty voice:

"Lord, Lord ... such infinity! Another year ... half a year! That's all I need."

Filya's heart was wrung with pain. He knew that Sanya would die that night. He would die soon. Filya said nothing.

"I'm not afraid," whispered Sanya hastily, drawing on his last strength. "There's nothing to be afraid of... But one more year, and I'd accept it. You have to be able to accept it! It can't just

happen like that... It's not an execution! Why should it be like this?.."

"Have a drink of vodka, Sanya."

"Half a year! Summer... I don't need anything, I'll watch the sun... I won't break a single blade of grass. Who wants it if I don't want it?" Sanya wept. "Filipp..."

"What, Sanya?"

"Who wants it? It's stupid, so stupid!.. Death's an idiot! A kind of mowing-machine."

Filya wept too—he could feel the tears running down his cheeks. He wiped them away angrily with his sleeve.

"Sanya, don't call Death names, maybe she ... maybe it'll pass you by. Don't insult her."

"I'm not insulting her. But it's so stupid! So crude ... and there's no way to help! The idiot!"

Sanya closed his eyes and fell silent. He said nothing for a long, long time. Filya even thought that it was all over.

"Turn me over..." Sanya asked him. "Turn me away from you." Filya turned his friend to face the wall.

"The idiot," Sanya repeated, scarcely audibly. And he fell silent again.

Filya sat on the chair for about an hour without moving, waiting for Sanya to ask for something. Or say something. Sanya didn't speak again. He was dead.

Filya and the other men buried Sanya. They buried him quietly, without any superfluous words. They drunk to his memory.

Filya planted a birch-tree at the head of his grave. It thrived. And when the warm southern

winds blew, the birch-tree bent down and rustled, rustling the small green palms of its numerous leaves, as though it were struggling to say something. But it couldn't.

A MASTER CRAFTSMAN

In Chebrovka village there was a fellow called Syomka Rys, a terrible boozer, but the finest carpenter for miles around. Tall and thin, with a big nose, he wasn't much of a he-man to look at. But when he took off his shirt and stood there in his sun-bleached vest, playing with his axe and snapping cheerfully at the foreman, you could see that all his strength and power was in his arms. Syomka's arms weren't knotted or bumpy. They ran smoothly from shoulder to wrist like burnished steel. They were beautiful arms and made an axe look like a toy. Arms like those never got tired, so Syomka was just trying it on when he yelled:

"Think we run by clockwork, do you? Come and wind me up then. I've run down. But watch it, or I might kick out from behind!"

Syomka was not a bad fellow. But he was "fed up to the teeth" and squandered his "horse-power" on brawling, wrangling and kicking up a rumpus. Now and then he would get blind drunk. Once he didn't touch the stuff for over a year, but then he got so down in the dumps that he started again.

"Why d'ye do it, Syomka?" folk asked him.

"It gives a kind of meaning to life, see? So I get sloshed, see? And I go round for a week feeling sort of guilty when I see you lot. I don't want to play any dirty tricks on you, and I think better of you. I think you're better than me. But when I

gave it up that time, I got sick of the sight of you... Dammit! Anyway I don't get plastered every day, do I?"

When he was drunk he never misbehaved and never mistreated the missus, just didn't notice her.

"You wait, Syomka, you'll get hooked good and proper," they warned him. "Boozers are all the same. Go two or three months without it, then drink themselves silly. You'll see."

"Okay, okay," Syomka would say. "I drink and you don't. But who says you're any better than me? What've you done that's so special? I work the same as you do. My kids are dressed as well as yours, and I don't thieve and fiddle like some..."

"But a carpenter like you could make a packet. You'd be living on the fat of the land, if it weren't for the drink."

"Well, living on the fat of the land is too slippery."

He always gave his wages to his wife. And paid for his drink with money he got from doing odd jobs. He could make a cupboard that fair took your breath away. People came from all over and offered him plenty of cash to make them things. A writer who spent a holiday in Chebrovka one summer even took Syomka back to town with him to decorate his study... They decided to make it look like the inside of a log cabin (the writer had been born in the country and used to get homesick for his roots).

"What a waste of money!" his fellow-villagers exclaimed, when Syomka told them how they'd decorated a modern town apartment to make it look like the inside of a sixteenth-century log cabin.

"We made the floor from wooden blocks, see. Just planed them, nothing else, didn't even paint them. And the desk was of planks too. We put benches round the walls and a bed in the corner. No mattresses or blankets on it, just a piece of felt and a sheepskin coat. Then we blacked the ceiling with a blow-lamp to make it look like a cabin without a chimney. And covered the walls with planks..."

The villagers shook their heads.

"Some folk got money to burn."

"Sixteenth century," Syomka would say dreamily. "He showed me some drawings, and I did it from them."

While Syomka was at the writer's place in the town he didn't drink at all. Just read books about the old days, looked at icons and admired distaffs. The writer had piles of things like that.

The same summer that Syomka had been to the town, he began noticing the little church in Talitsa village, about three miles from Chebrovka. Once there had been twenty families living in Talitsa, but now there were only eight. The church had been closed down ages ago. Small and made of stone, it came into sight suddenly behind the hillside at a bend in the road to Talitsa. For some reason the builders of long ago had decided to place it not on top of the hill, where churches usually stood, but at the bottom

of the hillside. Syomka could still remember as a child, you'd be walking to Talitsa and thinking about something or other, then you'd suddenly come to at the bend in the road, when the lovely white church appeared amid the dense green of the poplar trees.

There was a church in Chebrovka too, only it must have been built later, a big one with a tall bell-tower. It had been closed for ages too, and now there was a big crack in one wall. If you compared the two churches, the big one high up and the other one tucked behind the hill, which would you say looked the nicest? The little one behind the hill. Everything about it was just right: the way it came into sight all of a sudden, and its airy gracefulness... You could see the Chebrovka one for miles around. That's why they'd built it up there. But the Talitsa church seemed to have been tucked away on purpose and only showed itself to you suddenly if you were walking towards it...

On one of his days off Syomka went over to take a look at the Talitsa church. He sat down on the hillside and gazed at it carefully. There was peace and quiet all around. It was quiet in the village too. There she stood, the white beauty, amid the green of the trees. How many years the church had stood on that spot and how much it must have seen. The sun had risen and set over it, the rain had washed its walls and the snow almost buried them. Yet there it still stood. Who cared about it now? The builders had long since rotted away in the ground. The clever brain that planned it had turned to ashes, and the heart that

thrilled with joy was now a handful of dust. What had that unknown craftsman thought as he left this fairy-tale in stone behind him? Had he erected it to the glory of God or to prove himself? People who want to prove themselves don't stray so far from the beaten track. They stick to the highroads or simply march straight into the busy town square where they're sure to attract attention. This one had been concerned with something else. Beauty, perhaps? He had sung his song and sung it well. Then gone away. Why was that? He hadn't known himself. His heart had bade him to. Dear departed brother! I don't know what to say to you. You won't hear it anyway where you are, in your terrible black nothingness. And what can I say anyway? That it's good, beautiful, moving, pleasing... What's the point of saying that? He himself was pleased and moved by it and knew that it was beautiful. So what? So nothing. Be pleased if you can, and please others if you can. And if you can't— go off and fight or order other folk to fight or do something else, like blowing up this fairy-tale here; put a couple of kilos of dynamite under it and blow it sky high. To each his own.

Then Syomka noticed that four slabs of stone at the top, just under the cornice, were different from the rest. They shone. He went closer to have a good look. Yes, the builder must have wanted to polish the whole wall. It was the east wall, and if he had finished the job, at sunrise on clear days (the sun rose up from behind the slope) the church would have slowly started shining from the top dome and the whole wall would gradually

have been covered with a gleaming sheet of light from the cross to the foundations. He had begun the job, but stopped it for some reason. Perhaps the person who commissioned the church and provided the money had said: "Never mind, it's good enough like that."

Syomka got excited. He wanted to find out how to polish stone. You probably used coarse sand first, then finer sand, then a piece of cloth or leather. It was a long job.

He could get into the church through the crypt. Syomka had known that as a child and often climbed in with the other kids. The entrance to the crypt, which once had a double door (removed long ago), had partly collapsed and was overgrown with weeds... Syomka managed to squeeze through a crack between a slab and some stepping stones and then, by crawling on all fours or bending almost double, he made his way into the narthex. The church seemed very spacious inside...Alight breeze stirred a loose piece of iron on the dome, and the sound, barely audible outside, echoed loudly and anxiously in there. Beams of light from the windows pierced the shadowy emptiness like broad golden swords.

Only now, disturbed by the beauty and mystery, did Syomka look round and discover that instead of a right angle between the walls and the floor, there was an even line of masonry curving inwards. Along the foot of each wall was *a* stone addition about a metre from the wall by the foundations and the height of a man. It diminished gradually, merging into the walls at the top. At first Syomka couldn't think what it

was for. He only noticed that the slabs of stone were well polished and neatly laid. They were dark at the bottom and grew light the further up they went, until they blended into the white wall. The inside of the dome right at the top was made of some special stone and probably polished too, because it looked so bright and festive-up there. And there were only four small narrow windows...

Syomka sat down on the step leading up to the sanctuary and wondered what that extra section was for. He explained it to himself like this: the builder had wanted to do away with right angles and get rid of the square. Nothing is so constricting and cramped as a square interior. That was why he had put the dark slabs of stone at the bottom and gradually made them blend with the wall higher up, sort of pushing the walls back a bit.

Syonika sat in the church until the patch of light on the stone floor almost crept up to his feet. Then he clambered out and went home.

Next day Syomka reported sick and didn't go to work. Instead he went to the district centre where there was a church still used for services. He found the priest in his house nearby. The priest sent his son out of the room and said simply:

"Yes."

The dark alert eyes of the priest who was still quite young looked at Syomka with an almost mischievous twinkle. He waited.

"You know the Talitsa church?" For some reason Syomka had decided that you could adopt

a fairly casual tone when talking to writers and priests. "Talitsa, in Chebrovka district."

"The Talitsa church? In Chebrovka district... The little one?"

"That's it."

"Yes, I know it."

"How old is it?"

The priest thought for a moment.

"How old? I'm afraid I can't be absolutely sure... But I think it dates back to Tsar Alexei... His son didn't build that many churches, you know. Second half of the seventeenth century. What about it?"

"It's a lovely job!" Syomka exclaimed. "Don't you think?"

The priest smiled.

"Thank the Lord it's still there. Yes, it's lovely alright. I haven't seen it for a long time, but I remember it. At the foot of the hill, isn't it?"

"Who built it?"

"You'd have to ask the metropolitan that. I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"But you've got enough money! Haven't you?"

"Well, suppose we have."

"No supposing. You have got it. You're separate from the state now..."

"What's the point of all this?"

"It's such a beauty, why don't you repair it? I'd do the job for you. Finish it in a summer. I'd just need a couple of helpers and we'd have it ready before winter. If you could pay us say..."

"I can't decide matters like that, my friend. I have superiors too. Go and see the metropolitan."

The priest had got quite excited too. "Talk to him about it, why not? Are you a believer?"

"That's not the point. I'm the same as everyone else, sometimes a bit worse, 'cos I drink. It's just that I don't like seeing such a lovely bit of work go to rack and ruin. They've started restoring churches now..."

"It's the state that does the restoring."

"But you've got money too."

"The state does the restoring. For reasons of its own. Go and see the metropolitan."

"Where can I find him? Here?"

"No, it's quite a journey."

"In the regional centre?"

"That's right."

"But I haven't got enough money with me. I thought I was only coming to see you."

"I'll give you some. Where are you from?"

"Chebrovka. Name's Semyon Rys. I'm a carpenter."

"Well, you go and see him, Semyon. He's a clever man. Tell him all about it. Have you come by yourself?"

"What do you mean—by myself?" Syomka didn't understand him.

"Have you come by yourself, or did anyone send you?"

"I came by myself."

"Never mind, go and see him all the same! In the meantime I'll give him a ring and tell him what it's all about, so he'll see you."

Semyon thought for a moment.

"Alright then. I'll pay you back later."

"We'll talk about that afterwards. Come and see me on the way back and tell me what happened."

The metropolitan, a large, grey-haired, very sober old man with an unexpectedly high voice, greeted Syomka warmly.

"I had a call from Father Gerasim... Now tell me what made you think of repairing the church."

Syomka took a sip of hot tea from the dainty cup.

"How I thought of it? Well, I just saw what a lovely job it was. And nobody gives a damn about it!"

The metropolitan smiled.

"Yes, it is a lovely church. I know it. Dates back to Tsar Alexei. I don't know yet who the architect was. We can find that out. But the land belonged to the Boryatinsky family. Why do you want to know the name of the builder?"

"I'm just interested. He knew what he was doing."

"Yes, he was talented alright. We'll find out later who it was. He was obviously familiar with Vladimir and Moscow churches..."

"You'll never guess what he thought up!" Syomka started telling the metropolitan how he'd puzzled out the builder's secret.

The metropolitan listened, nodding and uttering the occasional: "Well, I never!" At the same time Syomka outlined his own ideas, about polishing the east wall as the builder had intended, sheathing and gilding the domes and putting stained glass in the upper windows—that would make the light under the dome look really

wonderful! The builder had used a special sort of stone for the bit under the dome, probably with a mixture of mica... If you put orange-coloured glass in as well, think what it would look like...

"That's all very well, my boy," the metropolitan interrupted him. "If they were to tell me: 'Very well, we give you permission to repair the Talitsa church. Who do you recommend for the job?' I would say without batting an eyelid: 'Semyon Rys, the carpenter in Chebrovka/ Only ... they won't give me permission to repair it, so there, lad. Sad to say."

"Why not?"

"I'll ask them that too: 'Why not?' And then they'll ask me: "What's the point?' How many families are there in Talitsa? I'm asking you."

"In Talitsa ... not many..."

"But that's not the main reason. What sort of fight against religion would it be, if they started opening up new parishes? You just think about that!"

"The church doesn't have to be used for praying. They use them as museums these days..."

"Ah, but museums come under the state. They've nothing to do with us."

"So what's the answer then?"

"This is what I suggest. You all get together and write a letter. Say there's a church in Talitsa which is falling to pieces, and you think it's of value, only not from the point of view of religion..."

"We'll never be able to write a letter like that. You write it yourself."

"I can't. Find someone who knows how to write. Or do it yourself, in your own words ... that'll be even better..."

"I know just the person!" Syomka had remembered the writer.

"Then take the petition to the authorities. The regional executive committee. And they'll decide. If they say no, write to Moscow... But don't write to Moscow first. Wait until you get a refusal here. They might send a commission..."

"It would be nice for folk to just see it standing there..."

"That's my advice. And don't say a word about our talk. Don't mention in your letter that you've been here. Don't mention it anywhere. It'll only spoil everything. Goodbye, my son. May the Lord grant you success."

As he was going out, Syomka noticed that the metropolitan seemed to live pretty well. The big house must have had about eight rooms, and there was a Volga in the yard. This came as an unpleasant surprise to Syomka, and he decided that perhaps it was better to have dealings with the good old Soviet authorities after all. Those priests were a funny lot. All crazy to help you, if only nanny would let them.

But Syomka decided to go and see the writer first. He found the house, but the writer wasn't at home.

"He's not in," a plump young woman told Syomka somewhat sharply and slammed the door. No, he hadn't seen her there when he was decorating the "sixteenth-century log cabin". He

suddenly had an urge to see the "cabin" again. So he rang the bell a second time.

"I'll go," he heard the woman say inside. The door opened again...

"Well, what is it now?"

"It was me that did up Nikolai Yefimich's study... Could I just have a look at it, please?"

"Well, I never!" the woman exclaimed not very loudly. And shut the door.

"I bet he really is at home," Syomka thought. "And I bet they're in the middle of an almight row."

He hung around for a bit hoping the woman would forget herself and shout angrily: "There's some idiot outside who says he did up your study", and the writer would come to the door himself. But the writer did not come. Perhaps he really wasn't at home after all.

Syomka went to the regional executive committee offices.

He got in to see the chairman straightaway due to a misunderstanding. As he walked into the reception room, the secretary snapped at him:

"Why are you so late? They complain that he does not receive them when he is busy, and when he invites them they take their time. Where are the others?"

"Out there," said Syomka. "They're just coming."

"They're just coming." The secretary went into the office for a moment, then came out and said angrily: "You can go in now."

Syomka went into the office. The chairman came over to shake hands.

"What a fuss you made, eh, my goodness, what a fuss!" he said with a smile, but a hint of reproach. "Making a fuss are we, friends? Hello there!"

"I've come about the church," said Syomka, shaking the chairman's hand. "She mistook me for someone else, your secretary. I've just come by myself ... about the church..."

"What church?"

"At our place, well, not our place, in Talitsa. There's a seventeenth-century church in Talitsa. A lovely job. If it was repaired... Not for praying in, I mean! It's valuable, but not from the point of view of religion. If you gave me three lads, I'd do it before the cold season sets in." Syomka was speaking hurriedly, because he couldn't stand it when people looked at him in bewilderment. It made him feel on edge. "I say, there's this church in Talitsa village," he began again, talking slowly this time, but already feeling irritated. "It's in a bad state and needs repairing. It's something the Russian people should be proud of, but no one's looking after it. If it was repaired, it would stand there another three hundred years and be a joy to folk."

"Hmm," said the chairman. "We'll soon sort this one out." He pressed a button on his desk. The secretary put her head round the door.

"Ask Zavadsky to come in, will you? So there's an old church in your village and you thought it was of interest as an architectural monument of the seventeenth century. Is that it?"

"That's right. The point is that it don't need all that much doing to it: just repair the domes,

support the masonry here and there and maybe put in a wooden frame."

"Yes, yes... We have someone who deals with precisely that sort of thing. Here he is."

Into the office came a good-looking youngish man with wavy black hair and a dimple in his chin.

"Would you mind seeing to this, Igor Alexandrovich. It's just up your street."

"This way, please," said Igor Alexandrovich.

They set off down a long corridor with Igor Alexandrovich in front and Syomka half a pace behind him.

"I'm not from Talitsa myself. I'm from Chebrovka. Talitsa's not far..."

"Yes, yes, just a moment." Igor Alexandrovich nodded without turning round. "We'll sort that all out in a minute."

"People don't waste much time here," Syomka thought to himself.

They went into another office, not as grand as the chairman's. Just a room with a desk, a chair, some blueprints on the walls and a shelf of books.

"Here we are," said Igor Alexandrovich. "Now just sit down and tell me all about it. Take your time."

Syomka began to tell him all the details. While he was listening, Igor Alexandrovich took a file from the shelf, leafed through it, found what he wanted, held it open at that page, and began to exhibit clear signs of impatience which Syomka noticed.

"Is that all?" asked Igor Alexandrovich.

"For the time being."

"Well, listen to this. Talitsa church. N- Region. Chebrovka district.'" Igor Alexandrovich began to read. '"On-the-Blood, so-called. Thought to belong to the latter third of the seventeenth century. One of the Boryatinsky princes met his death in Talitsa at the hand of an enemy...'" Igor Alexandrovich looked up from the paper to voice his own hypothesis. "It may have been a quarrel between two drunken brothers or friends. So... 'lost his life at the hand of an enemy, and the church was built on the same spot. The architect is not known. Of no value as an architectural monument, since the architect did not achieve anything new for his day, any unexpected treatment or search for the same. A more or less exact copy of the Vladimir churches. The dimensions warrant attention, but were evidently dictated by the financial possibilities of the person who commissioned it, and not by architectural considerations. Closed down in nineteen hundred and twenty five/ "

"Have you seen it?" asked Syomka.

"Yes, I have. This here," Igor Alexandrovich pointed to the sheet with the official report in his file, "is a reply to my enquiry. I was misled by it, like you were..."

"Have you been inside?"

"Yes, of course. I even took some of our specialists there..."

"Wait a minute!" Syomka growled ominously. "What did the specialists say? About the section that was added on..."

"Along the walls? Oh, I can tell you what that is. The Boryatinskys used their church as a family burial place, so they dug into the foundations quite a bit. You may have noticed that the church tilts slightly to one side. Later on one of them decided to put a stop to this. So they added that extra section. You probably saw the inscriptions on the stones over the places where the graves are."

Syomka felt disheartened.

"But it's such a lovely job!" he-tried to object.

"Yes, it is." Igor Alexandrovich got lightly to his feet, took a book off the shelf and showed Syomka a photograph of a church. "Does it look like that?"

"Yes, it does."

"That's the Church of the Intercession near Vladimir. Twelfth century. Ever been to Vladimir?"

"I don't believe it..." Syomka nodded at the official report. "I think they're having you on, those specialists of yours. I'm going to write to Moscow."

"This report is a reply from Moscow. I thought it was twelfth century too, that was my mistake. Thought someone had invented the same things as the Vladimir builders, on his own, independently or perhaps from something he'd been told. But miracles don't happen. Did the village council send you?"

"No, I came by myself..."

Syomka left the same day. He arrived at the district centre before it got dark and went to Father Gerasim's home.

Father Gerasim was in church taking a service. Syomka handed back the rest of the money, leaving himself enough for his ticket home and a bottle of red wine, and said he would send the rest by post. Then he set off home.

After that he never said another word about the Talitsa church or went to see it, and if he happened to drive along the road to Talitsa, he would turn his back on it at the bend, look at the river and meadows on the other side, and smoke a cigarette in silence. People noticed that and no one dared to speak to him at such a moment. And no one asked him why he had gone to the regional centre and what he had done there. If he hadn't told them himself, that meant he didn't want to talk about it, so what was the point of asking him?

A MATCHMAKING

At the age of sixty-eight old Yemelyan Glukhov became a widower. He buried his wife, presided over the funeral feast, wept, and said, "How am I to get along now? All alone?"

Yes, that's what he said. All old men in his position say the same thing. He was unhappy, bitterly unhappy, but he was not actually thinking of how he would get along now. He was just unhappy and sad, and that was all. He was not looking ahead.

But time went by, a year passed, and the old man really did begin to find the solitude unbearable. Not that he felt miserable. Or maybe he did feel miserable... It was grim to be all alone in the big cottage. He had a son, his youngest (the older boys had been killed in the war). But he lived in town, his son did, and seldom came on a visit-except to collect some potatoes or pickled cabbage, cucumbers or honey for the children (the old man kept six hives), or some home-cured bacon. Such visits irritated rather than comforted the old man. He didn't grudge the bacon, the honey or the cucumbers. No, it wasn't that. The bitter thing was that his own son was not like a son any more, but just a kind of hanger-on. He gave him the bacon and the cabbage, always chose the best and said nothing, burying the resentment he could not help feeling. Suppose he had told his son how lonely and sick at heart he

felt... What could Vanka do about it? They'd just spend the evening, moping together, drink a bottle between them, then off he'd go with his suitcase back to that town of his, to his own family. That was life.

So the old man took it into his head to marry again. Yes, and he had actually spotted a wife for himself.

It was on May 9th. Victory Day. As usual on that day the whole village gathered at the cemetery, in memory of those who had been killed in the war. Someone from the village Soviet stood on a stool with a list and read out the names:

"Grebtsov Nikolai Mitrofanovich, Gulyayev llya Vasilyevich, Glukhov Vasily Yemelyanovich, Glukhov Stepan Yemelyanovich, Glukhov Pavel Yemelyanovich..."

Those three were Yemelyan Glukhov's sons. Always, when his sons' names were read out, the old man felt the cruel fingers of grief clutching at his throat and found it hard to breathe... He would stare at the ground without weeping, and yet seeing nothing. He would go on standing there and the man from the Soviet would go on reading out name after name...

People wept quietly at the cemetery. Into the corners of shawls, into their hands, sighing under their breath, as if afraid to disturb and insult the silence that belonged to these solemn minutes. When the old man felt a little relief he would look around. And always he would think the same thing, "How many lives destroyed."

And this time he noticed in the crowd an old woman called Otavina. She was not a native of the village, though she had lived there a long time. Glukhov knew her. None of her family were on the list, but she wept quietly with everyone else and crossed herself. Old Glukhov respected religious folk because they were persecuted and ridiculed, for their patience and grit. For their honesty. He took a closer look at Otavina. She was a hook-nosed old lady, still pretty strong, well able to cope with a vegetable patch, heat the bath-house, make dough and bake bread.

The old man couldn't eat "state" bread from the baker's. And then the thought occurred to him that she, too, must be miserable all by herself.

He went home, drank a glass in memory of his sons and started thinking things over. She can sell her little cottage and come to live with me. And she can put the money she gets for the cottage into savings. Let her live here. The house won't feel so empty anyway. At least I'll be able to have a proper steaming in the bath-house and a nice rest after it... There'll be someone to lay the table and tell me my meal's ready. The house will feel as if it's lived in again! It makes all the difference when there's someone rattling the tongs by the stove and there's smell of dough on the rise. Or at night, when I can't sleep, I'll be able to have a quiet chat... Blow off steam about that team-leader of ours, for instance. She's religious, of course, is Otavina. Still I can choose the right kind of words. They needn't be offensive to God, there's plenty of others. Me, I'm on the way out, to the grave. I've done enough swearing

for one life. Aye, it'd be a good thing if she came and lived here. Say what you like, but a house needs a mistress... So thought the old man and actually grew quite excited at the prospect.

He chose the following Sunday to pay a visit to Olga Sergeyevna Malysheva, also an old woman, but younger than Otavina, and one of the brainier kind. The old man had once been secretly very much in love with this Olga Sergeyevna. In those days he had been no old man but a young fellow, and he had loved a beautiful and headstrong young Olga. He had thought of sending the matchmakers to her family, but the revolution had intervened. A young commissar had appeared in the village one day, quickly turned Olga's head and carried her off somewhere. Aye, he had managed that part of it all right, but then he had disappeared. Got caught up with the general shambles. And Olga Sergeyevna had returned home and ever since then had lived alone. One day, while still a young man, though already married, Glukhov had gone to see Olga Sergeyevna at the village Soviet (she was the secretary there) and opened his heart to her. Olga Sergeyevna grew angry, burst into tears and said that after her gallant commissar she would never in her life let anyone come near her. Glukhov tried to explain that he hadn't had any wrong intentions but that he had simply wanted to say he was in love with her (he'd had a drink or two). What was wrong with that? Olga Sergeyevna became even more offended and again declared that all the men in the world put together weren't fit to hold a candle to her

unforgettable commissar. In fact, she frightened all the men in the village so badly with this talk of her commissar that others besides Glukhov were afraid to approach her.

But many years had passed since then. That was all over and forgotten and life had long since set off on a new, bustling course... Another love, not theirs, cried out on earth... Old Glukhov and Olga Sergeyevna Malysheva, now a retired pensioner, had struck up a rather strange friendship. The old man gave her a hand with the outdoor jobs: he would clear the snow for her in winter, chop some firewood, fix her broomhandle for her, patch up the roof, and then they would sit down together and have a chat. Olga Sergeyevna would put a bottle on the table. But even so, Glukhov felt nervous in her presence and praised Soviet power beyond all measure.

"This government we've got now—it's real regular, isn't it! In the old days *a* man could live to be as old as the hills and no one would have any use for him. But now he gets a pension. Why, I ask you, should they hand me out twenty rubles every month? My own son comes home and gives me a fiver and that's good enough, even if he does forget sometimes. But the government—they're reg'lar, they are—come and get it every month. Aye, it was them commissars, they knew what was what. They laid down their lives, they did, for a bright future and for communism! I propose, Olga Sergeyevna, that we stand up for a moment in honour of their memory." Olga Sergeyevna was not impressed. "Sit down, man,"

she would say in a surly tone. "What's the point now?-.. That's all over and done with."

Nowadays she seldom recalled her commissar and was more inclined to talk of how certain sensations "came over" her at night.

"It just starts coming over me all of a sudden and I think to myself it's all up with me now, death's knocking at the door for me..."

"Where does it come over you? On the chest?"

"AH over. All over me, from head to foot! My number's up this time, I think. And then I go all limp and can't move hand or foot! And I seem to be floating away somewhere. Floating, floating..."

"Aye," Glukhov would say sympathetically. "That's how it is—you might float away altogether one day."

After the old man had buried his wife, he became an even more frequent visitor at Malysheva's. They liked sitting together on the veranda, drinking their tea with honey. He would bring her honey in a birch-bark punnet.

"Feeling lonely?" Malysheva would ask.

Glukhov didn't know how to answer that one. He was afraid that if he gave the wrong answer she would hold him up to-shame. She often did give him to understand that, even if he would soon be seventy, he ought to listen to her a great deal more and keep quiet himself.

"Feeling lonely?"

"Well..." Glukhov would begin vaguely. "It's a loss of course. After all, we lived fifty years together."

"You can live a hundred years together. But was there any sense in it? Elephants live two hundred years, but what's the sense?"

Glukhov resented this.

"I had three sons killed in the war! And you say such things to me..."

"I'm not saying anything," Olga Sergeyevna retorted. "They died for their country."

"Of course, I miss her," Glukhov replied more boldly now. "All the things she had to put up with from me! She bore it all. I was a bit of a lad when I was young, you know. Liked to have my fling... She bore it all... Aye, it's a real loss."

"Social consciousness..." Malysheva said suddenly, and sighed. "You men, you need a lot of knocking into shape! It'd take another two hundred years to make anything human of you. You, for instance, you lived with her for fifty years... And now? You haven't a word to say about it. There's plenty of weeds on my allotment. They grow and live for years. And next to them are Victoria strawberries. But there's a difference, isn't there?"

"What are you so cross about?" Glukhov would ask in bewilderment.

"There's a difference, isn't there? I ask you!"

"But how can you compare..."

"I can and I will! Because there are some people that live and burn like fire, and others just smoulder. Some are full of meaning to the last pore, and others... they just do their job and that's all. Studhorses."

"Everyone can't be a commissar!" Glukhov said crossly, stung by the "studhorses".

"Lived with her fifty years," Malysheva mimicked. "But was there a single week with any meaning in it?"

"There was plenty of meaning all right. More than enough."

"That's obvious!" Malysheva pursed her lips till they looked like "a parson's nose".

Glukhov sensed that he was annoying her in some way, though he could not for the life of him understand how.

But still he continued to go and see the woman. Sometimes they would be on the verge of a quarrel, sometimes it wouldn't go off too badly and they would part on friendly terms. Anyway it helped to pass the evening.

On the Sunday in question Glukhov came to Malysheva without his axe and hand-saw. He came to talk to her and be advised.

"I want your advice, Sergeyevna. Help me."

"What's happened then?" Malysheva was all ears. She liked handing out advice.

"D'you know an old woman called Otavina?"

"What about her?"

"Could you have a word with her and find out if she'd agree to move in with me? She can sell her own cottage, or board it up for the meantime. We'll live together for a bit and see if we can get on with each other, then she can sell it. No need to take a chance. What do you think? I wouldn't have the pluck to talk to her myself, but you'll know what to say. I'll be good to her... After all, we'll feel steadier standing on four feet than on two, though they're not so sprightly as they used to be. What d'you think?" Glukhov had much

more to say than usual and he spoke unusually fast—he was embarrassed. "I've been thinking this over and over, and now I've got the answer. It's a rotten life all alone. And I reckon she'll find it easier too. What d'you think?"

Malysheva was greatly surprised. She was so surprised that at first she couldn't find anything sensible to say.

"Want to get married, huh?"

"Well, you could hardly call it marriage... We'll just be living together to make things a bit easier."

"In the eyes of the law that's marriage. Why not be honest about it?"

Glukhov was taken aback.

"All right, then, I'm getting married. Anything wrong in that?"

Malysheva studied the old man estrangedly, with a kind of concealed hostility.

"Does she consent? Though you say you haven't had time to talk to her."

"She doesn't know anything about it! That's why I'm asking you to talk to her. Talk to her and throw in a bit of persuasion as well. She's a religious soul, you know, she might say it's a sin... But where's the sin in it? Look at it reasonable like. I'm lonely, she's lonely..."

"She's got a daughter in town."

"What of it! I've got a son in town myself. They're a fat lot of good nowadays. But if we was together we could while away the rest of our lives. The first of us to die would have someone to bury him."

"But you've got children!" Malysheva suddenly raised her voice in irritation. "Why make yourselves out a couple of orphans?"

Glukhov made no reply. In his turn he gave Malysheva a sharp, angry look. What was biting her? "What's wrong, Sergeyevna?" he asked. "Nothing wrong with me. It's you that's getting married, not me. Yet you ask me what's wrong. I'm quite all right."

"You seem to be angry?"

"Not at all! Me? Angry? The idea! Get married! You want me to talk to Otavina? I'll talk to her." Now it was Malysheva who was flustered and talking twenty to the dozen. "I'll have her round for a chat, it's no trouble to me. I'll find out if she consents. Why should I be angry? It's you people will be laughing at, not me."

"Will they?"

"Will they what?"

"Will they laugh?"

"Did you think they'd be pleased?"

"Don't old folk ever pair up together?"

"They do sometimes. All right, come round tomorrow at dinner time... I'll ask her to drop in earlier, so we can talk it over beforehand. And you come round later. Yes, of course, it happens sometimes. Plenty of old folk do it! I'll talk to her, don't worry. I'll talk to her."

Glukhov left Malysheva in a puzzled frame of mind. He sensed that she had something up her sleeve. She was a funny old bird, no doubt about that. Always annoyed about something. Always wanting to change everybody, make them into different people, teach them how to live, pass

judgement on them. The old man even considered whether he ought not to go back and tell her her help wasn't needed; he'd manage quite well by himself. He actually stopped to think it over. But what did it matter anyway? Let her do the talking. He wouldn't do so well on his own. Bad-tempered she might be, but she'd do what she promised.

The next day the two old women—Malysheva and Otavina—met each other and a conversation took place.

Otavina came round to Malysheva's and the first thing she did was look at the front right-hand corner of the room, hoping there might be an ikon there; then she sat down meekly on the edge of the velveteen-covered sofa, and said good morning.

"What I asked you round for was this," Malysheva began at once. "D'you know old Glukhov?" [f]

"Yemelyan Yegorich? Of course, I do. Three of his sons were killed..."

"Well, he wants to marry you," Malysheva rapped out. "D'you consent?"

"Mercy on us!" Otavina crossed herself. "What's come over him?"

"Why not?" Malysheva seemed to be in high spirits all of a sudden. "You're both on your own... Think it over well before you give your answer. He's an old ram like all the rest of 'em, but he'll help you to live out the rest of your days. What d'you think about it? He says you shouldn't sell your house yet. You can just board it up. If you get on together, then you can sell it and put the

money in the bank. Well, what d'you think about it?" »

"What can I think? All my thoughts have flown out of my head. How can I rush headlong into a marriage like that?" Otavina gave a little laugh that was quite sincere. "Well now! It's enough to send you off your head. A fine bride I'd make!"

"And a fine bridegroom he is. Well, what about it?"

"Wait a bit, Sergeyevna. Let me get my breath first..."

"He'll be here soon for your answer."

"Oh!" Otavina actually rose from the sofa and looked at the door. Then she sat down again. "Well, this is some problem!"

"I can see you've almost consented already."

Otavina suddenly started considering the matter seriously.

"I'll tell you this, Sergeyevna. He's not a bad old fellow. He doesn't drink, doesn't take the name of our Lord in vain, not as I've heard... Only..." She looked at the matchmaker. "Well, it does happen that old folk pair up together sometimes..."

"It does happen."

"But"... suppose he gets troublesome at night?"

Malysheva's jaw dropped.

"What?"

"Well, you know what they are! The first thing I'd like to be sure of is that he won't be up to anything like that. And that he won't swear. Of course, he smokes... Still, they all do, you can't put a rein on that."

"So you consent, do you?" Malysheva exclaimed in astonishment.

"Wait a bit, don't rush me off my feet. As I was saying, I'm going to be making so many conditions. He can't do this, can't do that. The old man will think about it and say, 'Well, what *can* I do then?' And then all this matchmaking will come to nothing." Otavina gave another quiet little laugh. "Well, I must say I'd never have thought it... Goodness me! I might not be so bad, though? One good friend of mine—she used to live in Bulanikha, where I lived before—the same thing happened to her. An old man comes round wanting to talk about this and that, and then he says, 'Let's live together, Kuzmovna.' And so they did. He died about two years ago, and now she's living in his house. And they got on well together, I know. How long was it?... About five years. He never gave her any cause to complain. People grow wiser in their old age. Not like the ones nowadays. You've only to look around you... Goodness me! You look and it takes your breath away. Of course, it wouldn't be a bad thing for me to finish up in a nice warm house... My little house is nearly falling to bits. I'm right glad the winter's over. I couldn't get the place warm anyhow. All the fuel I'd burn and it was still like living under a sieve."

"Why don't you go and stay with your daughter?"

"Not a hope! They're crowded enough as it is... I've tried it. When my grandchildren were little, I stayed with them. It was terrible. It was terrible for everybody. Then the children grew up and

started going to school. So they bought me that little cottage—and mighty glad I was. I'd sold my own house in Bulanikha when my daughter married. That was a real solid house, that was. It'll stand for another hundred years. But I'd sold it. I had to. They needed the money to buy a flat, and where else could they get it? He was just demobbed from the army, and my daughter had only just finished technical school. Come on, mother, they say, sell the house. Then we'll buy you another if you don't want to live with us. So I lived with them and brought up the children, but after that—no, I says, buy me a place of my own, no matter how small it is. I can't stand the town, it puts me right out of sorts, it does. So they hummed and hawed for a bit, then found the money. The houses are dearer in Bulanikha and cheaper here, and so this is where I've landed. Of course, it wouldn't be a bad thing for me in my old age ... to live in a nice warm house... Not so bad that."

Old Glukhov knew that there was to be a conversation between the two old women, but he had no idea what course it would take. Just in case, he put on a new jacket, took a bottle of liqueur and a punnet of honey and set out for Malysheva's.

He came in and uttered a respectful greeting, then, looking embarrassed for some reason, placed the bottle and the punnet on the table and fumbled in his pocket for his tobacco pouch.

"Wait a bit with that bottle," Malysheva said. "Don't you be in such a hurry."

The old man's heart sank. He was now quite taken with the idea of living with Otavina, and he had it all thought out. But now what?

"I've listened to what each of you has to say... It's your own personal life, of course, you can pair up together if you like... Some people go stark staring mad in their old age, and even that doesn't matter. But what I want to ask you both is this: Aren't you ashamed? Aren't you?" She hurled the words in their faces, hurled them with inexplicable cruelty, with all the feeling of a heart that was sick with some secret pain. And she went on hurling and hurling, no matter how the would-be betrothed blushed and squirmed in their places, no matter how they suffered. "How will you be able to face the world afterwards? How? Some people are alone all their lives... I've lived alone all my life, ever since I was twenty-three... And d'you think no one ever proposed to me? Oh yes, they did. D'you think they never came knocking at my window of a night? They did and all. You, Glukhov, didn't you come to me at the village Soviet and say you couldn't live without me? Didn't you? Now then, speak up, man."

Glukhov longed for the earth to open and swallow him up.

"It was only my foolishness—I was drunk," he mumbled. "I didn't propose to you... I was just talking about the past. Why go into all that?"

"Foolishness! And now he's a clever one—at the age of seventy he thinks he'll get married. Clever! And you, woman, you!.. 'I'll have to think it over ... live in a nice warm house.' Call yourself

a godly woman! As bad as him... You point at other people's sinning. But what about yourselves? What example are you setting the young people! Have you thought of that? D'you realise your responsibility to the community?" Malysheva rapped her dry knuckles on the table. "Have you ever considered that? You're self-centred! The people work with all their might, and you plan a wedding ... tempting people to drink and frivolous relations. You shameless pair!"

"What wedding?!" Glukhov blurted out again. Otavina was speechless. "We'd just pair up together quietly. What wedding?"

"Like a real couple of—guttersnipes! Pah! Like animals."

"Screw you!" the old man blew up. And he left the house, slamming the door behind him.

Otavina left the house after him. Indeed, both of them flew out of the door as if they had been scalded. Once outside the gate, they turned away in different directions without so much as a glance at each other, although both ought to have taken the same path for part of the way.

Old Glukhov made a wide detour round the village before returning home. He was spitting and swearing in disgust and couldn't keep still for a moment. In his fury he even thought to himself, "I'll burn the bitch's place down!"

He didn't do anything of the kind, of course. But he promised himself never to go and see her again. And when he met her in the street, he cut her dead.

Otavina went off to town to go to church and atone for her sins in prayer. The old woman was very upset and avoided meeting Malysheva whenever she could.

Malysheva said nothing to anyone about this extraordinary matchmaking. Both Glukhov and Otavina were expecting her to tell the whole village. But no, she never said a word about it.

THE TOUGH GUY

Brigade three at the Gigant collective farm had just been given a new storehouse. Out of the old storehouse, a church, they moved some empty, foul-smelling barrels, sacks of cement, salt and sugar, piles of bast matting and harness (the brigade had only five horses, but there was enough harness for fifteen; that wouldn't have mattered, too much is always better than too little, if it weren't for the darned mice... They'd tarred the harness and smothered it with pesticide, but the mice still kept nibbling away at it), a broom and some rakes and spades... Now it was empty, the church, and no one needed it. Small though it was, the church livened up and showed . off the village (once much larger), which nestled around it.

Brigade leader Nikolai Shurygin stood looking at it thoughtfully... He walked up to it, tapped the brickwork with a crow-bar he'd found lying there, lit a cigarette, then went home.

Meeting the collective farm chairman a few days later, Shurygin said:

"Church's empty now..."

"So what?"

"What we gonna do with it?"

"Lock it up, and let it be. Why?"

"It's got some good brick. I could use that for a pigsty, instead of lugging some over from the brickworks."

"You'd have to dismantle it first—that'd take five men a good fortnight. Those bricks are fair welded together. God knows what they used for mortar."

"I'll pull it down alright."

"How?"

"Easy. Chain three tractors to it, and it'll fall down like a pack of cards."

"Have a go then."

That Sunday Shurygin did have a go. He got hold of three powerful tractors, wound three thick cables round the church at different levels, then put nine logs under the cables, at the corners and in the middle of the walls...

At first Shurygin went about this job, as he went about all his jobs, with a lot of shouting and cursing. But as more and more folk ran up and started wailing in horror and amazement, he suddenly felt like some high-up official with unlimited authority. He stopped swearing and did not look at the crowd, as if he simply did not hear or see them.

"Did they tell ye to do that, Nikolai?" folk asked him. "Surely it weren't yer own idea?"

"What harm did it do ye, eh?"

Mikhailo Belyakov, the storeman, already tipsy, crawled under the cables to where Shurygin was standing.

"What ye doin' that for, Nikolai?"

Shurygin turned pale and really let fly.

"Shove off, ye drunken fat-head!"

Mikhailo backed away from the brigade leader in surprise. And everyone around was so amazed that they stopped talking. Shurygin was partial to

a bottle himself, but he'd never called anyone a "drunken fat-head" before. What had got into him?

Meanwhile they tightened the logs and put all the cables at the same level. Any minute now the tractors would rev up and something unheard-of in the village would happen-the village church would fall down. The older folk had all been christened in it, their grandparents and great-grandparents had been buried in it, and it was as familiar to them all as the sky itself...

The shouts broke out again.

"Who told ye to, Nikolai?"

"It's his own idea! See him lookin' away, the devil."

"Stop throwin' yer weight around, Shurygin!"

Shurygin took no notice of them at all. He still had the same concentrated expression on his face and the same look of incorruptible severity in his eyes. Shurygin's wife, Klava, was pushed forward by the crowd. She went up to her husband timidly. There was something funny about him.

"Why d'ye want to pull it down, Nikolai?"

"Shove off!" Shurygin ordered her too. "And mind yer own business!"

Some folk went up to the tractor-drivers to try and delay things, while others hurried off to phone the district authorities and fetch the school-master. But Shurygin had already promised the tractor-drivers a bottle of vodka each and extra pay for "performing their duties".

Up rushed the school-master, a young man much respected by the villagers.

"Stop that at once! Who told you to pull it down? It's seventeenth century!"

"Mind yer own business," said Shurygin.

"It is my business! It's everyone's business!" The school master was so upset that instead of finding some strong, persuasive words, he could only flush and shout: "You've no right to! Vandal! I'll write to the authorities!"

Shurygin gave the tractor-drivers a wave... The engines revved up, the cables tautened, and the crowd gave a quiet, horrified groan. Suddenly the teacher ran round the church to the side where it was going to collapse and stood by the wall.

"You'll be guilty of murder, idiot!"

The tractors stopped.

"Get out of the way!" roared Shurygin, the veins swelling thickly in his neck.

"Don't you dare touch the church! Don't you dare!"

Shurygin ran over to the school-master, grabbed hold of him and carried him away from the church. The puny man tried to struggle free, but Shurygin's grip was stronger.

"Carry on, lads!" he shouted to the tractor-drivers.

"Everyone go and stand by the wall!" cried the schoolmaster. "Go on! They won't dare to then! I'll go to the regional committee. They'll stop him alright."

"Get a move on!" Shurygin yelled at the tractor-drivers.

The tractor-drivers drew back into their cabins and grabbed hold of the gear lever.

"Stand by the wall! Go on, everybody!"

But no one moved. They were all paralysed by Shurygin's frenzy. They kept quiet. And waited.

The cables tightened, creaked, cracked and rang. One of the logs crunched. A cable cut into a corner and sang like a balalaika string. Funny that you could hear it so well, with the three tractors grinding away. The top of the church quivered ... the wall facing the people suddenly split right across... A terrible black crack began to yawn open on the white wall. The dome tilted slowly to one side, then toppled down with a crash. The ground shuddered, as if from an exploding shell, and everything was enveloped in clouds of dust.

Shurygin let go of the teacher, who turned and walked away from the church without a word.

Two of the tractors were still gouging the earth with their caterpillar tracks. The cable in the middle had cut into the corner and was now pulverising the bricks in the two walls pointlessly, grinding ever deeper into them.

Shurygin stopped the tractors. They began to move the cables round.

Folk started drifting off. Only the most curious remained, and the young boys.

Three hours later it was over. All that remained of the church was a low hulk with jagged edges. The church itself lay in a deathly shapeless heap. The tractors drove away.

Covered in dust, lime and sweat, Shurygin went to phone the farm chairman from the village store.

"It's all over. She's kicked the bucket!" he shouted chirpily down the receiver.

The chairman obviously did not know who had kicked the bucket.

"The church! It's all over! That's right. Everything's fine. School-master made a bit of a fuss... You bet! Worse than an old woman, he is. No, everything's okay. Went down like a bomb. Yes, lots got broken up. Into clumps of three or four bricks. Don't know how to get them apart. Had a go with a crowbar, but that was no good. The bloody things are fair welded together! Never mind! Cheers then! Don't you worry."

Shurygin put the phone down. He went over to the shop-woman whom he'd often woken up at night, when someone from the district centre came over for a spot of fishing and the two of them sat up afterwards until the early hours at the brigade leader's place.

"See how we finished off the old girl?" Shurygin said with a satisfied smile.

"Stupid bastard," said the shop-woman, not even trying to conceal her anger.

"What's stupid about it?" Shurygin stopped smiling.

"Weren't doin' you no harm, were it, standin' there?"

"What good was it, just standin' there? At least we c'n use the bricks..."

"Since when've you been so hard up for bricks? Crackpot."

"Fiddle fingers!" Shurygin got angry too. "Hold yer tongue, if you don't know what you're talkin' about."

"You just try wakin' me up again in the middle of the night, and I'll wake you up for a change.

Fiddle fingers, eh? That's worth a slap round the chops, that is. With this weight here."

Shurygin was about to call the stupid shop-woman something else, when the ever-present old women appeared on the scene.

"Gimme a bottle."

"Go and wet your whistle," someone said at the back. "It's dried up!"

"From all that dust!"

"Satan finds work for idle hands!"

Shurygin looked round sternly at the women, but there were too many of them to shout down. And there was something unusual about their anger. They really hated him. He took the bottle and went out of the shop. On the threshold he turned round and said:

"I'll shut your traps up!"

Then strode away quickly.

He walked along, fuming to himself: "They never said their prayers, the parasites, but now they're raising Cain. Nobody gave a damn about it, but now they're raising hell."

Walking past what used to be the church, Shurygin stopped for a long time to watch the children scavaging among the bricks. He calmed down as he looked. "When they grow up they'll remember, the day the church was pulled down. I remember Vaska Dukhanin takin' the cross off it. And now it's come tumblin' down. They'll remember that for sure. And tell their kids about it: 'Uncle Nikolai Shurygin put cables round it and...'"At this point Shurygin suddenly remembered the shop-woman and swore angrily

to himself: "Why the blazes should it stand there, dammit."

At home Shurygin faced a regular revolt: his wife had gone off to the neighbours without making supper and his sick mother kept scolding him from the bench bed over the stove.

" Tis a great sin ye've taken on yerself, cursed idol that ye are! Did it all without sayin' a word, he did, the devil. If ye'd just uttered a word, good folk might've made ye see sense. Mercy upon us, we won't be able to show our faces now. Folk'll curse ye, aye, curse ye, they will! And ye won't know when to expect disaster: maybe ye'll kick the bucket at home all sudden like, or get bashed by a tree in the forest..."

"Why should they curse me? Ain't they got anything better to do?"

"Tis a terrible sin!"

"What about Vaska Dukhanin who pulled the cross down? They didn't curse him. He was a hero..."

"Aye, but they were different times. Who put the idea into yer head, eh, to pull it down? Who? Twas the devil himself... Ye'l! get punished good and proper by Soviet power itself, just wait. That there teacher's writin' to the proper places, they said. Ye'll be for it. Church stood there through thick and thin, then he had to come along, God help us. Goggle-eyed heathen."

"Give over, you're supposed to be ill."

"We'll never be able to show our faces again..."

"Nobody ever went to pray in it. It just stood there, without no one noticin'it..."

"Who says no one noticed it! Folk could see it wherever they went. And however tired ye got, ye'd look at it and feel at home. Gave ye strength, it did..."

"Listen to her... I don't know what's the matter with them. It's the atomic age, right, and they're moanin' about a church. There's no club in the village, but they couldn't care less about that. It's the church that's upset them. Never mind, they'll get over it!"

"Aye, but how will ye get over it? Ye'll shrivel up with shame, and no mistake!"

So as not to hear her mutterings, Shurygin went into the parlour, sat down at the table, poured himself a full glass of vodka and gulped it down. Then he lit a cigarette. "The brick's no good for anything," he thought. "Never mind, dammit. I'll bulldoze the lot into a heap and let nettles grow over it."

His wife came back late. Shurygin had already finished the bottle and wanted another one, but he didn't like the idea of seeing the angry shop-woman again.

"Nip out and get us a bottle, " he asked his wife.

"Ask the devil. He's yer friend now."

"Come on, I'm asking ye to..."

"People asked ye and did you take any notice? Then don't ask other folk now. Idiot."

"Shut up. Go to..."

"And I will too. I'll go where all good folk go. And not where ye'll end up, ignorant clot! They begged ye, the whole village, but ye took no notice! Just goggled..."

"Shut up! Or I'll give you a belting..."

"Just you try! Just dare touch me, ye shameless clot! Just dare touch me!"

"No, there'll be no peace tonight. Everyone's gone crackers."

Shurygin went into the yard and got on his motorbike. It was eighteen kilometres to the district centre, where the farm chairman lived and there was a shop. He could have a drink there and a talk. He'd tell him about the fuss folk had made here, and the two of them would have a good laugh.

At the bend in the road, his headlight picked out an ugly pile of bricks in the darkness. A dank smell wafted from the ruined crypt.

"Seventeenth century," Shurygin remembered. "There it is, your seventeenth century! So he's writing to the proper places, is he? Well, let him. So what!"

Shurygin stepped on the gas... He started singing at the top of his voice to show everyone that he was in fine spirits—in spite of all their curses:

With a ho, ho, ho and a hee, hee, hee.
I'm the ho-ho-ho of the ninth company.
Battalion number thirty three.
With a hey-diddle-diddle
And a tirra-lirra lee!

The motorbike roared out of the village, sending a shining blade of light into the night, and sped along the smoothly rolled road towards the district centre. Shurygin liked going fast.

I BELIEVE!

On Sundays a particular melancholy attacked him. Something caustic welling up inside... Maxim could physically feel the vileness of it: as if some shameless, unwholesome sloven with foul breath was running her hands over his body, fondling him, leaning over to give him a kiss.

"It's back again, dammit."

"Oh God!.. What a slob." Maxim's wife, Lyuda, mocked him. She was a tough, unsentimental working woman, who didn't know what melancholy was. "What is it that's making you miserable?"

Maxim Yarikov looked at his wife, and his dark eyes gleamed brightly... He squeezed his jaw tight.

"Go on, swear away. Maybe it will help get rid of the misery. You're good at swearing."

Maxim sometimes forced himself not to swear and argue. When he wanted her to understand him.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Why wouldn't I? If you explain I will."

"You've got everything where it should be—arms, legs, all the other organs. What size they are is a different matter, but everything's in the right place. If your leg hurts, you feel it, if you feel hungry, you cook dinner... Right?"

"Well?"

Maxim rose lightly to his feet (he was a trim forty-year-old, quick-tempered and impetuous,

who could never tire himself out at work, even though he worked a lot) and walked around the room, his eyes gleaming angrily.

"But a man has something else, too—a soul! In here, and that's where it hurts!" Maxim pointed to his chest. "I'm not making it up! I can just feel it, it hurts."

"Does it hurt anywhere else?"

"Listen!" screeched Maxim. "Since you want to understand, listen. You might have been born without feelings, but you could at least try to understand that some people have souls. It's not vodka money I'm after, what I want is... Oh, you stupid idiot!" Maxim lost his temper completely. He suddenly realised he would never be able to explain what was happening to him, and his wife Lyuda would never understand him. Never! He could rip open his chest with a knife, pull his soul out and hold it in front of her, and all she'd say would be—"offal". Anyway, he didn't even believe in that kind of soul himself, in some lump of meat. Maybe it was all nothing but empty words. Why should he get himself so worked up? "Just ask me who I hate most in all the world, and I'll answer—people with no soul. Or with a rotten one. Talking to women is as much use as banging your head against a wall!"

"Ah, twaddle!"

"Get lost!"

"So why are you so bitter and angry, if you have a soul?"

"What do you think a soul is—some kind of sticky-bun? The thing is, it doesn't understand why I should be dragging it around with me, and

that's why it hurts. And that's why I get angry. I'm upset."

"Why should I give a damn if you get upset? Normal people wait for Sunday to come around and they relax... They go to the cinema. But you have to get upset, don't you? You're a slob."

Maxim would stop at the window, standing there for a long time without moving, as he looked out at the street.

Winter. Frost. Grey sooty smoke rising up from the village into the chilly, clear sky—people were keeping warm. If a woman went by with two buckets on a yoke, you could hear the thick, firm snow crunching under her felt boots, even through the double windows. A dog would start barking for no reason and then fall silent. Frost over everything. The people were in their homes, where it was warm. They were talking, cooking dinner, discussing their neighbour... If they had a bottle, they would drink, but they didn't enjoy that much either.

When Maxim was miserable, he didn't philosophize, he didn't think of asking anyone for anything. He just felt pain and bitter anger, but an anger that wasn't directed against anyone. He didn't feel like punching anyone in the face, and he didn't feel like hanging himself. He didn't want anything at all, that was what made the aching so damned bad! He didn't feel like lying on his back and staring at the ceiling, either. And he didn't feel like drinking vodka—he didn't want to be a laughing stock, that was disgusting. He had tried drinking a few times... When he was drunk he suddenly began to confess to sins so

vile that they made everybody, including himself, feel sick. Once when he was drunk he had wailed and beaten his head against the wall covered with posters in the militia-post. Supposedly he and some other man from the village had between them invented a powerful motor the size of a match-box, and handed over the plans to the Americans. Maxim confessed that this was foul treachery, that he was a "scientific traitor", and asked to be taken under escort to prison camp in Magadan. What's more, he insisted on walking the whole way barefoot.

"Why did you hand over the plans?" the sergeant demanded. "And who to?"

Maxim didn't know. He only knew that it was all "dreadful treachery". And he wept bitterly.

On one such miserable Sunday Maxim was standing by the window and looking at the road. It was clear and frosty again, and the chimneys were smoking.

"So what?" Maxim thought angrily. "That's the way it was a hundred years ago. So what's new? That's the way it will always be. There goes a young lad, Vanka Malofeyev's son... I remember Vanka himself, when he was that age, and so was I. And soon they'll have children of their own, just the same... Is that all there is? What's the point?"

Maxim felt really wretched. He remembered that Ilya Lapshin had a relative of his wife's staying at the house, and that the relative was a priest. An actual, genuine priest, with long flowing hair. The priest was sick, there was something wrong with his lungs, so he had come to the country for treatment. The treatment was

badger grease, and the badgers were procured by Ilya. The priest had lots of money, and he often drank pure spirit with Ilya. The priest drank nothing but pure spirit.

Maxim went to the Lapshins.

Ilya and the priest were there at the table, drinking spirit and chatting, Ilya was already well-oiled—his head was nodding as he mumbled about how next Sunday, not this one, but the next one he'd bring back twelve badgers at once.

"I don't need that many. I just want three good fat ones."

"I'll bring you twelve, and you can choose for yourself which ones you want. It's my job to bring them. And you choose for yourself which are best. The main thing is for you to get better... I'll bring you in twelve of them..."

The priest was bored with Ilya, and he was glad when Maxim showed up.

"Well?" he asked.

"My soul hurts," said Maxim. "I came to find out whether believers' souls hurt or not."

"Want some spirit?"

"Don't you get the idea I came here just to drink. I can take a drink, of course, but that's not what I came for. I wanted to know whether your soul ever hurts."

The priest poured some spirit into two glasses and set one glass and the carafe of water in front of Maxim.

"Add water to suit yourself."

The priest was a large man, sixty years old, with broad shoulders and huge hands. It was hard to believe that there was anything wrong

with his lungs. His eyes were clear and intelligent, and his gaze was intent to the point of insolence. He didn't seem the right kind to be waving a censer, more like someone hiding from his children's mothers. There was nothing mellow or pious about him, and with a face like that he'd hardly be interested in untangling the sensitive nerves of humanity's woes. But Maxim could sense immediately that the priest was interesting to be with.

"Your soul hurts?"

"Yes, it hurts."

"I see." The priest emptied his glass and dabbed his lips with the corner of the starched tablecloth. "Let's come at this from a distance. Listen carefully and don't interrupt." The priest leaned against the back of his chair, stroked his beard and began to speak, obviously enjoying himself:

"No sooner had humankind appeared than evil appeared too. When evil appeared, then the wish to struggle against it, that is, good, also appeared. In other words, if there's evil, then there's good too, if there's no evil, there's no good. Do you get my meaning?"

"Yes, get on with it."

"Don't tell me to get on, I'm not a horse." The priest clearly loved to reason like that in a strange, distant and irresponsible fashion. "What is Christ? He is the incarnation of good, whose mission is to destroy evil on earth. Two thousand years the idea of Christ has existed among people and struggled against evil."

My a was asleep at the table.

The priest poured another drink for himself and Maxim. He nodded to Maxim, inviting him to drink.

"For two thousand years the name of Christ has been destroying evil on earth, but there's no sign of the war coming to an end. Don't smoke, please. Or else take your dirty fumes over there by the vent."

Maxim stubbed out his roll-up on the sole of his boot and went on listening carefully.

"What's the matter with your lungs?" he asked, trying to be polite.

'They hurt," explained the priest, curtly and grudgingly.

"Does the badger grease help?"

"Yes. Let us continue, my miserable son..."

"What's that?" Maxim exclaimed.

"I asked you not to interrupt me."

"I asked about your lungs..."

"You asked what makes the soul hurt. And I'm drawing you a clear picture of the universe, in order to bring peace to your soul. Listen carefully and take it in. So, the idea of Christ sprang from the desire to defeat evil. Otherwise, what would be the point? Just imagine: good has triumphed. Christ has triumphed... But then what do we need him for? We don't, not any more. That means he's not something eternal and lasting, but a temporary means, like the dictatorship of the proletariat. I want to believe in eternity, in an immense eternal power and the eternal order to come."

"In communism, you mean?"

"Whatd'you mean, 'communism'?"

"D'you believe in communism?"

"I'm not supposed to. You're interrupting me again!"

"Okay, I won't do it any more. Only say it ... a bit simpler. And don't be in such a rush."

"I am saying it clearly: I want to believe in eternal good, in eternal justice, in the eternal Supreme Power that set everything in motion on this earth. I want to know this Power, and I want to believe that it will triumph. Otherwise-what's it all for? Eh? Where is this power?" The priest looked at Maxim quizzically. "Does it exist?"

Maxim shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"I don't know either."

"Well, that's a good one!"

"There's more to come. I don't know any such power. It's quite possible that as a man I am not allowed to know it, to understand it, to comprehend it. In that case'l give up trying to understand my existence here on earth. That's the way I feel, and you've brought your sick soul to the right man: my soul hurts too. Only you came for a ready-made answer, and I'm trying to get down to the bottom of things. The trouble is, it's like ladling out the ocean—we can't ladle it all out with these glasses. And when we swallow this rubbish..." The priest drained his glass of spirit and dabbed his lips with the tablecloth, "when we drink this stuff, we're trying to reach the bottom of the ocean by ladling it out. By the glassful, the glassful, my son! It's a vicious circle, we're doomed."

"I'm sorry ... d'you mind if I make one point?"

"Fire ahead."

"You're a ... an interesting kind of priest. Are there really priests like you?"

"I am human, and nothing human is alien to me. The words of a famous atheist, and he was exactly right. A little presumptious, to be sure—during his own lifetime no-one ever took him for a god."

"So, if I understand you right, there is no God?"

"I said there isn't. But now I tell you there is. Pour me a bit of spirit, my son, add twenty-five per cent water, and hand it to me. And pour some for yourself. Pour, my simple-minded son, and may we glimpse the bottom!" The priest drained his glass. "Now I tell you that God does exist. His name is Life. That's the God I believe in. What kind of God have we invented for ourselves? A kind, streamlined, hornless, milk-sop of a God. We're just plain stupid! There's no such God. There is a strict and powerful God-Life. This God offers us good and evil together—and that's what God really is. Why on earth do we think that good must defeat evil? What for? I'd like to know, for instance, whether you really came to me to find out the truth, or just to drink. You sit here goggling at me, pretending that you're interested in what I'm saying..."

Maxim squirmed on his chair.

"I'd like just as much to know whether what you really need is not this spirit, but the truth. It's extremely interesting to figure out what the truth is. Was it your soul that brought you here or the spirit? You see, I use my head instead of just feeling sorry for you, with your half-baked

problems. And therefore, in accordance with my own idea of God, I say that if your soul hurts, that's good. Good! At least you're alive and kicking! If you were in a state of spiritual harmony we'd never drag you down off the stove. Live, my son, weep and dance. Don't worry about having to lick out the frying pans in the next life, because you'll get plenty of heaven and hell here in this life." The priest was speaking loudly, his face was a flaming crimson, he had broken into a sweat. "You came here to find out what to believe in, did you? You guessed right. The souls of believers don't hurt. But what should we believe in? Believe in Life. I've no idea how it will all end. I don't know what it's all leading to. But I do find it fascinating to run along with everyone else, and to overtake the others when I can... So what if there is evil? If someone else in this magnificent race sticks his foot out to trip me up, then I'll get up and smash his face in. None of that 'turn the other cheek' nonsense. I'll smash his face in, and that's all there is to it."

"And what if he has a heavier punch?"

"Then I just have to run behind him."

"And where are we running to?"

"There and back again. What difference does it make where we're running to? We're all going the same way, good and bad together."

"Somehow I don't feel as though I'm in any hurry to get anywhere," said Maxim.

"So you're weak-kneed. Paralytic. You'll just stand there and whimper."

Maxim clenched his teeth... His fierce, angry eyes bored into the priest.

"What have I done to deserve that land of misery?"

"You're weak. Weak as ... a boiled rooster. Don't roll your eyes like that."

"Some priest you are! What if I give you a good thump, what then?"

The priest—with his sick lungs!—burst into intense, loud laughter.

"See that?" he asked, showing Maxim his huge ham of a hand. "I can rely on that. Natural selection will take its course."

"Then I'll bring a gun."

"They'll shoot you. You know that, and you won't bring a gun, because you're weak."

"Then I'll stab you with a knife. I can do that."

"You'd get five years. I'd be in pain for about a month until the wound healed. But you'd be inside for five years."

"Okay. Then why does your soul hurt?"

"I'm sick, my friend. I've only run half the distance and I've gone lame. Pour the drinks."

Maxim poured.

"Have you ever flown in an aeroplane?" the priest asked.

"Yes. Lots of times."

"I'd never flown before I came here. Magnificent! When I got into it, I thought, if this flying barracks crashes, then that's the way it was meant to be. I won't feel sorry or afraid! I felt fine all the way! And when it lifted me up off the ground and carried me away, I even stroked its flank and thought: well done! I believe in the aeroplane. Actually, lots of things in life are fair. For instance, people moan about Yesenin living

such a short life. He lived just long enough for his song. If the song had been longer, it wouldn't make your heart ache the way it does. There are no long songs."

"In your church they go on for ever."

"We don't have any songs, all we have is moaning and groaning. No, Yesenin lived exactly long enough for his song. Do you like Yesenin?"

"Yes."

"Let's sing some."

"I can't."

"Just help me along and don't get in my way."

And the priest began to drone the song about the frozen maple-tree, and he did it so sadly and so subtly that it really did make Maxim's heart ache. When he came to the words, "Recently I feel I'm somehow getting weaker", the priest pounded the table with his fist, burst into tears and shook his long mane of hair.

"The dear heart! He loved the peasant!.. He pitied him!.. And I love you. That's right, isn't it? If it's too late, so what?"

Maxim could feel himself beginning to love the priest.

"Father! Father! Listen to me!"

"I don't want to," said the priest, crying.

"Listen to me, you blockhead!"

"I don't want to! You're weak-kneed!"

"I'll leave your kind gasping after the first kilometre! Weak at the knees... You slob."

"Pray!" The priest rose to his feet. "Repeat after me..."

"Get lost!.."

Without straining himself, the priest lifted Maxim up by the scruff of the neck and set him down beside himself.

"Repeat after me: I believe!"

"I believe!" said Maxim. He really liked that phrase.

"Louder! More solemn: I believe! Together: I believe!"

"I be-lieve!" they drawled together. And then the priest continued on his own in a well-practised patter.

"In aviation, in the mechanisation of agriculture, in the scientific revolu-ti-on! In space and weightlessness! For this is all objecti-ive! Together, now! After me!.."

They yelled in unison:

"I belie-ieve!"

"I believe that soon everyone will gather into great stinking cities! I believe that they will choke for breath there and run back to the open fields!!.. I believe!"

"I belie-ieve!"

"In the badger's grease, in the bull's horn, in the upright shaft! In the body and its fle-esh..."

When llya Lapshin opened his eyes he saw the priest hurling his huge body around the room, jumping straight into squats, yelling and slapping his sides and his chest:

I believe, I believe!
Up, down, up, down, one, two, three!
I believe, I believe!
Umpah, umpah, four, five, six!

I believe, I believe!

And Maxim, his hands on his hips, was pattering round the priest and singing in a high-pitched womanish voice:

Oo-ee, oo-ee, one, two, three
I believe, I believe!
Oo-ee, oo-ee, four, five, six.

"After me!" exclaimed the priest.

"I believe! I believe!"

Maxim settled himself against the back of the priest's neck, and they danced in silence around the hut, then the priest once again launched himself into a squatting position, sinking down as though he had fallen through the ice on a lake, and spreading out his arms. The floorboards sagged.

Oh, I believe, I believe!
Number five, man alive
I believe, I believe!
Number six, pick up sticks
I believe, I believe!

The priest and Maxim were both dancing with such maniacal frenzy that it all seemed quite natural. They either had to dance or else rip the shirts from their chests, wail and gnash their teeth.

Ilya looked at them once, and then again, and then he joined in their dance. But he only yelled

"Yee-ha! Yee-ha!" every now and then in a shrill voice. He didn't know the words.

The shirt on the priest's back was soaking wet, and mounds of muscle shifted beneath it: he had obviously never known what it was to be tired in his life, and his sickness had not yet severed his thick sinews. They were probably not that easy to sever: he'd gobble up all the badgers first. And if he was told he needed it, he'd ask for a fine fat wolf—he wouldn't be that easy to get rid of.

"Follow me!" the priest ordered again.

And the other two followed the frenzied, crimson-faced priest in his wild dance, round and round. And then, like some great heavy animal, the priest leapt back into the middle of the circle, bending the floorboards beneath him... The plates and glasses on the table clattered.

"Ah! I believe! I believe!"

CUTTING THEM DOWN TO SIZE

Old Agafya Zhuravlyova's son, Konstantin Ivanovich, had come to visit her. With his wife and daughter. To take a look around and have a rest. Novaya was a small village, and Konstantin Ivanovich rolled up in a taxi, and the entire family took ages lugging the suitcases out of the boot... The whole village immediately knew that Agafya's middle son, Kostya, the rich one with the education, had arrived with his family.

By evening they knew the details: he was a candidate of science, and so was his wife, his daughter was still going to school. They had brought Agafya an electric samovar, a bright flowery house-coat and some wooden spoons.

That evening the village men gathered on Gleb Kapustin's porch. They were waiting for Gleb.

We have to say a word or two about Gleb Kapustin, if you are to understand why the men had gathered on his porch and what they were waiting for.

Gleb Kapustin was a thick-lipped, tow-haired forty-year-old, well-read and spiteful by nature. It just happened that, although Novaya was a small village, a lot of distinguished people came from there: one colonel, two pilots, a doctor, a newspaper correspondent.. And now Zhuravlyov, a candidate of science. And it had somehow become the custom that

when these distinguished individuals came to stay in the village the folk packed their

distinguished fellow-villager's hut in the evening to listen to amazing stories or even talk about themselves if the visitor was interested. And then Gleb Kapustin would come and cut the distinguished guest down to size. A lot of them did not like this, but *a* lot of them, especially the men, just sat there waiting for Gleb Kapustin to deal with the distinguished visitor. They didn't even wait—they went to Gleb's place beforehand, and then afterwards they went to see the visitor together. Just as if they were going to a show in a theatre. Last year it was a colonel Gleb had cut down to size—brilliantly, elegantly. The talk had turned to the war of 1812... It turned out that the colonel didn't know who had given the order to burn Moscow. That is, he knew it was some Count or other, but he got the name mixed up and called him Rasputin instead of Rastopchin. Gleb Kapustin soared up above the colonel like a hawk—and finished him off. The crowd grew excited, the colonel swore... They ran off to the teacher's house to ask her the name of the arsonist count. Gleb Kapustin sat there redfaced as he waited for the decisive moment, repeating: "Calm down, calm down, comrade colonel, we're not in Fili, are we now?" Gleb was declared victorious and the colonel beat himself over the head with his fist in bewilderment. He was extremely annoyed. For a long time afterwards the talk in the village was about how Gleb had just kept repeating: "Calm down, comrade colonel, we're not in Fili." They were amazed at him. The old men asked him why he'd said that.

Gleb laughed and screwed up his stubborn eyes vengefully. All the mothers in the village who had distinguished children disliked Gleb. They were worried about what might happen.

And now this candidate of science, Zhuravlyov, had arrived...

Gleb came home from work (he worked on a power-saw), got washed and changed his clothes... He didn't bother to eat. He went out to join the men on the porch.

They lit up their cigarettes... They spoke a little about this and that, deliberately avoiding mentioning Zhuravlyov. Then Gleb glanced a couple of times in the direction of grandmother Agafya's hut and asked:

"Has Old Agafya got guests?"

"Candidates of science!"

"Candidates of science?" Gleb was surprised. "0-oh!.. They're not such easy pickings!"

The men laughed: for some they might not be easy, but for others they might. And they kept glancing at Gleb impatiently.

"Right, let's go and take a look at these candidates of science," said Gleb modestly.

And off they went.

Gleb walked a little ahead of the others. He walked calmly, his hands in his pockets, squinting at Old Agafya's hut, which now contained two candidates of science. The men were more or less escorting Gleb, the way they escort an experienced fist-fighter when the word goes out that a hostile street has found a dashing new champion.

They didn't speak much on the way.

"What's their area of science?" Gleb asked.

"What's their area? Eh, God knows... The old woman just told me that they're candidates of science. Him and his wife..."

"There's candidates of technical science; there's candidates of humanities—they mostly deal in hot air."

"Kostya used to be hot at maths," recalled someone who used to go to school with him. "Always got top marks."

Gleb Kapustin came from the next village, and he didn't-know the local celebrities very well.

"We'll see, we'll see," Gleb promised indefinitely. "Candidates of science are common as muck around here."

"They came in a taxi..."

"Well, they have to keep up the image!.." laughed Gleb.

Candidate of Science Konstantin Ivanovich greeted his visitors happily and set about getting the table laid... The guests waited modestly while old Agafya laid the table, talking with the candidate of science, remembering their childhood togethter...

"Ah, childhood, childhood!" exclaimed the candidate of science. "Please sit down, my friends."

They all sat at the table. And Gleb Kapustin sat with them. For the time being he was quiet. But they could see that he was gathering himself to pounce. He smiled, and agreed with the talk about childhood, and kept glancing at the candidate of science, sizing him up.

At table the conversation became more friendly, and everyone seemed to have forgotten about Gleb Kapustin... Then suddenly he launched out at the visitor.

"What area are you active in?" he asked.

"Where do I work, you mean?" asked the candidate of science, bewildered.

"Yes."

"In the faculty of philology."

"Philosophy?"

"Not exactly... But you could say that."

"Very necessary thing." Gleb needed it to be philosophy. He became more lively. "What do you make of primacy?"

"What primacy?" The candidate of science was bewildered again. And he looked at Gleb closely. Everybody looked at Gleb.

"The primacy of spirit and matter." Gleb threw down the gauntlet. He assumed an apparently casual pose and waited for the gauntlet to be picked up. The candidate of science picked up the gauntlet.

"As always," he said with a smile, "matter is primary..."

"And spirit?"

"Spirit comes later. Why?"

"Is that in the entrance examination?" Gleb smiled too. "I'm sorry, we're a long way from the big centres here, and we don't get much chance for a good talk, there's no one to talk to. What does philosophy make of the concept of weightlessness these days?"

'The same as it always has. What do you mean, these days?"

"Well, the phenomenon was only discovered recently." Gleb smiled, looking the scholar straight in the face. "Natural philosophy, let's say, defines it one way and strategic philosophy defines it quite differently..."

"There's no such thing as strategic philosophy!" said the candidate of science, getting excited. "What are you talking about here?"

"Yes, but there is such a thing as the dialectics of nature," said Gleb calmly, everyone's attention focused on him. "And nature is defined by philosophy. Weightlessness was recently discovered to be one of the elements of nature. That's why I'm asking whether the philosophers are showing any signs of confusion."

The candidate of science laughed sincerely. But he was the only one who laughed... And he felt uncomfortable. He called his wife:

"Valya, come here. This is a very odd conversation we're having!"

Valya came up to the table, but Konstantin Ivanovich still felt uncomfortable, because the men were still watching him and waiting for his answer to the question.

"Let's determine what we're talking about," he said in a serious voice.

"Right. Second question. What's your personal attitude to the question of tribal magic in the far north?"

The candidates of science laughed. Gleb Kapustin smiled too. And waited patiently for the candidates of science to finish laughing.

"Of course, it's possible to pretend there's no such problem. I'd be glad to join in and laugh with you..."Gleb smiled magnanimously again. Especially at the wife, the candidates of science, so to speak. "But that won't make the problem go away. Right?"

"Are you being serious?" asked Valya.

"By your leave." Gleb Kapustin half stood, and bowed discreetly to the candidates. And he blushed. "Of course, it's not a universal question, but I think it would be interesting to find out."

"What question?" exclaimed the candidate of science.

"Your attitude to the problem of tribal magic." Valya began to laugh again. But she checked herself in time and said to Gleb, "I beg your pardon."

"It's alright," said Gleb. "I understand that maybe it's not a fair question..."

"There is no such problem!" blurted out the candidate of science, straight from the shoulder. He shouldn't have done that. That wasn't the way to do it.

And now Gleb laughed.

"Well if there isn't, there's no point in talking about it."

The men all looked at the candidate.

"Get the woman off the wagon and spare the horse," Gleb added. "So there's no problem but all these..." Gleb did something complicated with his hands. "All of them dancing and ringing their bells... Well? But if we don't want it..." Gleb repeated the words-"lf we don't want it, it's as if it doesn't exist. Right? Because if... Alright! One

more question: what do you think of the idea that the moon was created artificially?"

The candidate of science stared, dumbstruck, at Gleb. Gleb continued:

"Scientists have suggested that the moon follows an artificial orbit and that intelligent beings might live inside it..."

"Well?" asked the candidate of science. "What of it?"

"Have you calculated the natural trajectories? How can cosmic science be applied in general?"

The men were listening carefully to Gleb.

"If we allow that human beings will visit our neighbour in space more and more often, then we can expect that some fine day curiosity will get the better of the intelligent life-forms, and they'll come out to meet us. Are we prepared for understanding each other?"

"Who are you asking?'

"You, the thinkers..."

"Are you prepared?"

"We're not thinkers, that's not what we're paid for. But if you're interested, I can tell you the way we provincials think. Let's suppose some intelligent being has come out on to the surface of the moon... What would you say we should do? Bark like a dog? Sing like a cock?"

The men laughed and stirred in their seats, then fixed their gaze on Gleb again.

"But we have to understand each other somehow... Right? How?" Gleb let the guest ion hang in silence. He looked round at everyone. "I suggest drawing a plan of our solar system in the sand and pointing out that I'm from earth. And

showing him that although I'm wearing a space-suit, I have a head too and I'm an intelligent being. To confirm that, I can show him on the plan where he's from, by pointing at the moon, then at him. Is that logical? That way we can work out that we're neighbours. But that's all. Next we have to explain the laws according to which I have developed in order to become what I am at the present stage..."

"Yes." The candidate stirred in his seat and gave his wife a significant glance. "This is very interesting. What laws?"

That was a mistake too, because his significant glance was intercepted. Gleb soared up into the air... And came down on the candidate from a great height. This moment came in all his conversations with the village's celebrities, the moment when Gleb soared up on high. He probably waited eagerly for the moment to come, because after that everything happened automatically.

"Are you inviting your wife to laugh?" asked Gleb. He asked calmly, but inside he was probably quivering. "That's nice... Only perhaps first we should learn how to read the newspapers? What do you think? They say it's useful even for candidates of science..."

"Now, listen!"

"We've already listened! We've heard enough. Allow us to observe, Mr. Candidate of Science, that an academic title is not a suit of clothes that you buy and it's yours, once and for all. Even a suit has to be cleaned now and again. And learning needs to be brisked up even more

often." Gleb spoke quietly but emphatically, without any pauses for breath, he was carried away. It was painful just to look at the candidate: he was obviously totally confused, and kept looking at his wife, and at Gleb, and at the men... The men tried not to look at him. "Of course, it's easy enough to impress us here: drive up to the house in a taxi, drag five suitcases out of the boot... But you forget that the flow of information is spread evenly everywhere. I mean we might just happen to impress you. That happens too. You might think we'd never seen any candidates of science round here, but we have—candidates of science and professors, and colonels. And we have very pleasant memories of them, because for the most part they are very simple people. So my advice to you, comrade candidate of science, is to come back down to earth. It's a sound principle, and it's less risky. You won't hurt yourself so much if you fall."

"Now you've really pulled the rug out from under me," said the candidate. "Just what, exactly, are you raving about?"

"Well, well," Gleb interrupted him, hurriedly. "What d'you mean 'raving'? I've never been in the madhouse. Why'd you say that?" Gleb looked round the men. "Nobody else here has ever been locked away either, they don't understand what you mean. And now your wife's making big eyes... What if your daughter hears. Then she might go pulling the rug out from under someone in Moscow, ah? All this loose language might have a bad effect. Not all means are good, I tell you, not by any means. When you were taking the basic

candidate's examination, you didn't pull the rug out from under the professor, did you?" Gleb rose to his feet. "And you didn't try 'to put one over on him' and you didn't talk smart lingo? Because professors have to be respected—they can fix things, but nothing depends on us—you can use the smart lingo with us. Right? No, wrong! We're not entirely clueless round here either. We read the newspapers, and sometimes even books... And we even watch television. And, you know, we're not absolutely delighted by the programmes they put on. Why not? Because they're all full of the same conceit. Never mind them, they'll swallow anything. And they do, of course, there's nothing you can do about it. Only there's no point pretending everyone in the big city is a genius. Some of us understand a few things. They should be a bit more modest."

"A typical scheming demagogue," said the candidate, turning to his wife. "All the standard features..."

"You're wide of the mark. In all my life I've never written a single anonymous letter or denounced anyone." Gleb looked at the men: the men knew it was the truth. "That's not it, comrade candidate of science. Would you like me to explain what I really am?"

"Yes, I would."

"I'm someone who likes tweaking noses, so people don't get above themselves! More modesty, dear comrades..."

"And what makes you think we lack modesty?" asked Valya, unable to restrain herself any

longer. "What have we done to make you think that?"

"When you're on your own, you just think about it, and you'll understand." There was even a hint of pity in the way Gleb looked at the candidates of science. "You can say 'honey' as often as you like, but it won't taste sweet in the mouth. You don't have to pass the basic candidate's examination to understand that. Right? You can write 'the people' in all your articles hundreds of times if you like, but you won't contribute anything to knowledge. So when you drive out to see the people, you should be a bit more careful in what you say. A bit better prepared, maybe. Or else you can easily end up being made a fool of. Goodbye. I hope you have a pleasant holiday... among the people." Gleb chuckled and took his time going out of the hut. He always left on his own after a meeting with distinguished visitors.

He didn't hear the men talking afterwards as they left the candidates:

"He walked all over him!.. The cunning dog. How did he know all that about the moon?"

"He cut him down to size alright."

"Would you reckon it?"

And the men shook their heads, dumbfounded.

"A cunning dog. He fixed poor old Konstantin Ivanich... Ah? Fixed him good! And that wife of his, Valya, she never even opened her mouth."

"What was there to say? Nothing. Kostya wanted to say something, but Gleb said five words to his one."

"He's a cunning dog, right enough."

There seemed to be a note of pity or sympathy for the candidates in the men's voices. But their astonishment at Gleb Kapustin was as great as ever. They were astounded. Even delighted. Even though they might not really like him. No, they didn't like him. Gleb was cruel, and no one anywhere has ever liked cruelty.

The next day Gleb Kapustin would go to work and ask the men in passing, as if he wasn't really interested:

"Well how's the candidate getting on?"

And he would grin.

"You cut him right down to size," they would say.

"Never mind," Gleb would say magnanimously. "It's good for him. Let him do a bit of thinking during his holiday. These people get above themselves..."

STEP OUT, MAESTRO!

Solodovnikov the play-actor was late again for work. He came late nearly every day. The head doctor, fat Anna Afanasievna, would say:

"I'll write to your mother, Solodovnikov!"

Then Solodovnikov acted embarrassed: Anna Afanasievna (or Anfas, as Solodovnikov referred to her in letters to his ex-fellow students whom fate had also banished to remote spots such as this and who still wrote to one another complaining and making witticisms) would begin to show slight signs of movement. She was laughing. Silently. She enjoyed being the mentor and protector of this young doctor, this young Don Juan. Solodovnikov, however, while pretending to be embarrassed, would regret that his rare talent for pleasing people was being used to no effect. Anfas could not play an even remotely significant part in his destiny. Long may she keep the hospital well-stocked with spirit, camphor, sheet iron and radiators for the central heating. She was good at that, bless her heart. And at winkling out the odd appendix. Solodovnikov had performed more complicated operations and again regretted that no one had seen them. "I was terribly tempted to do an auto-transplant," he wrote to a friend. "I'd just been reading about modern advances and remembered the old man. But ... then I got cold feet. 'No, I can't,' I thought, 'there's no one to watch, so what's the point?' Strike me dead, but I'm an

actor. And my precious Anfas is not a fitting audience. No, sir."

Solodovnikov was in a hurry. In his mind he had already rehearsed the morning scene with Anna Afanasievna: he would frown and look at his watch... In fact, after scenes like that he sometimes felt rather mean. "I'm a rotter," he would think. "And why do I do it? It doesn't even help me, it's quite pointless!" Yet at the same time he experienced a pleasant sort of sensation, a nice reassuring feeling that everything was alright, everything was as it should be for an eligible young bachelor.

Solodovnikov ran up to the porch, pushed open the heavy door on a spring and held it so that it wouldn't bang. Removing his coat and hat as he went, he hurried to the clothes rack in the corridor. While he was taking off his things, he suddenly saw a square of yellow, the size of a window, on the white wall opposite the window. Sunlight... Suddenly this square of yellow fire blazed up in his mind. Spring! The lovely, long-awaited spring was outside. He'd rushed along the street, crunching the ice underfoot and thinking about goodness knows what, and hadn't noticed the spring. But now ... he froze, clutching his coat and staring at the square of yellow. And a rush of joy, a special joy, also nice and reassuring with the promise of warmth and joy ahead too, filled Solodovnikov's breast. That very breast within which beat a young heart hungry for joy. Solodovnikov was surprised and wanted to collect his thoughts quickly, to concentrate them on a single thing: now that it was spring, he

must sit down and solve something important. A feeling that something nice lay ahead washed over him. I must pull myself together and do some hard thinking, he thought. I'm only twenty-four. I've got my whole life ahead of me, and I must decide now that I've still got the strength, plenty of it, and feel so good. It's spring. I must begin to live big."

Solodovnikov went into his tiny office (thanks to the efforts of the self-same solicitous Anna Afanasievna he even had an office of his own), sat down at his desk and began to meditate. He did not go to see Anna Afanasievna. She would come herself.

He wasn't thinking about anything definite, but he still had the same happy feeling that had come over him just now, with the spring and the light, and he kept probing it, that nice feeling, kept listening to himself... He couldn't help listening to the sounds outside as well: icicles warmed by the sun were dripping onto the tin window-sill, and the wet splashing sound, so strange and unexpected on this clear sunny morning with a light frost, produced a joyful echo in his heart with each loud splash. Yes, I must make a fresh start, Solodovnikov thought. No more dithering. Thank goodness I managed to graduate from the institute, while I was still messing around. Other people aren't so lucky. He believed that now he would begin to live big. This was just the right moment. Spring is the beginning of all beginnings. From now on he would take charge of everything and no nonsense. Twenty-five plus twenty-five is fifty. By the time he was fifty he

must have a professorship in Moscow, a flock of students and a long list of publications. No, by forty-five, not fifty. He'd have to put his nose to the grindstone, but why not!

Solodovnikov got up and walked round the tiny office. He stopped by the window. The happy feeling was still there. The world was so vast... And life was so vast... But step out, maestro, step out! You've got a long way to go. And your triumphant campaign begins right here, with this spring.

Solodovnikov sat down at the desk again, got out a pen, looked for some paper in the desk, couldn't find any, then took his address book out of his pocket and wrote on a blank page:

Henceforth I shall act so:
The cold flash of the mind
Like the ruthless flash of a dagger:
A thrust is the law,
A thrust is an end,
A thrust is a new beginning.

He read it through, flung down the pen and began pacing the tiny office again. He lit a cigarette. He was amazed to have written a poem. He'd never written one before. Never dreamed he could write one. How about that! He went up to the desk and read the poem again. Hmm. Of course, it may be a bit ... conceited. Actually it wasn't really a poem at all, it was a kind of programme of action expressed in poetic form. He paced the office again... Suddenly he laughed out loud. It was a surgeon's poem: "A

thrust is an end, a thrust is a new beginning". What was the new beginning? Another ulcer case? Never mind... He was glad to find that writing a poem hadn't gone to his head, he could still laugh at its weak points. But he must keep it: amusing and naive though it was, this marked the beginning of living big. Solodovnikov put the address book away. If he wasn't dead tired by the age of fifty and still had a sense of humour, he would recall this poem then.

The splashes on the window-sill outside continued. And the window was getting noticeably warmer. Spring was doing its job. Solodovnikov felt a sudden need for action.

He went into the corridor, walked past the yellow patch on the wall again, winked at it and said to himself: "Step out, maestro!"

Anna Afanasievna was on the phone, of course, talking about sheet iron, of course. They exchanged nods.

"I understand, Nikolai Vassilievich," Anna Afanasievna cooed sweetly into the receiver. "I understand perfectly. Yes, yes. Fifteen sheets."

"We understand everything perfectly, Nikolai Vassilievich," Solodovnikov smirked to himself sarcastically, squatting on a white stool. The sarcasm wasn't spiteful, just due to an excess of high spirits... He couldn't wait to have a talk to Anna Afanasievna.

"I understand perfectly, Nikolai Vassilievich! Yes. Will do!" Anna Afanasievna exhibited signs of slight movement—laughing silently. "One good turn deserves another. Goodbye then! Oh, no, not here. Why are you always so afraid of us, as if ...

goodness only knows. See you then— on neutral ground. At the restaurant?" Anfas began shaking all over again. "We'll see about that. Okey-dokey! Bye."

"How witty can you get? "Will do' and 'okey-dokey'l" Solodovnikov marvelled. "Fancy wasting time like that, nattering away, when each minute here is precious now."

"Yes, Georgy Nikolayevich..." Anna Afanasievna gave Solodovnikov a playful, meaningful look.

"Long live sheet iron!" said Solodovnikov also playfully, without the slightest embarrassment, feigned or otherwise. He looked Anna Afanasievna straight in the eye.

"Meaning what?" she asked.

"Meaning we'll have a home-made refrigerator." Solodovnikov got up, walked over to the window, stood there for a bit, hands in pockets, sensing the head doctor's surprised stare behind him... He rocked from his toes onto his heels. And told a lie. A big one. Quite unexpectedly.

"I've started to write a book, Anna Afanasievna. It's called *Letters from the Depths. A Doctor's Notebook."*

It seemed to happen on its own, the *Letters from the Depths.* And again Solodovnikov was amazed at how right it sounded. That's how he must start. Had the unconscious act of creation really begun? Unless it was "a thrust is the law", of course. No, this was real, intelligent, to the point: it would be a description of interesting operations performed in the conditions of a country hospital. In the form of letters to a friend

called N. There was some light irony about the conditions, a description of a home-made refrigerator, *a* hole in the ground lined with sheets of iron, and, running lightly through it—the theme of spring... But mostly, of course, it was about hard work, hard work and more hard work. Exhausting, exhilarating, risky and selfless. The love and respect of the locals... The night visits.

Auto-transplants. A perforation in a field hospital. The old woman's gratitude, her funny, heartfelt prayers for the young atheist doctor... He saw it all happily in a split second, suddenly and clearly. Solodovnikov turned to Anna Afanasievna... And there was the head doctor, of course, Anna Afanasievna, a bit limited, but very good at getting hold of things in short supply. Anfas, who had read the *Notebook* in manuscript and exclaimed in surprise: "It's just like a novel!"

"Yes, but as a physician do you find it interesting?"

"I should say so! There are some quite unique cases in it!"

"And you're not offended by the passages about you?"

"No, why should I be? It's all quite true."

"What was that, Anna Afanasievna?"

"Have you already started writing it?" Anna Afanasievna asked. "Your *Notebook.* Is that why you were late?"

"Yes, that's why." Solodovnikov was annoyed with the head doctor. A sergeant-major in a skirt, she was, with a head full of sheet iron. "I'm sorry," he said curtly. "It won't happen again." He

didn't look at his watch or pretend to be upset. "That's enough," he thought. "Finite. No more grimacing and curtseying." He remembered his poem.

"You're rather strange today."

"What about the tractor-driver, the ulcer case?" Solodovnikov asked. "Are we going to operate?"

Anna Afanasievna looked even more surprised.

"Zubov? Good heavens, what are you talking about? I sent him to the district hospital two days ago."

"Why?"

"Because you asked me to, that's why. What is the matter with you?"

"Oh, yes," Solodovnikov remembered. "And the girl with the meniscus?"

"She's still here. Do you want to operate?"

"Yes," said Solodovnikov firmly. "Today."

Anna Afanasievna gave her assistant a long look. Solodovnikov looked at her too, somewhat pensively, screwing up his eyes.

"I see," murmured Anna Afanasievna. "Alright then…

Only not today, Georgy Nikolayevich. Today I need you to help me, Georgy Nikolayevich. I've been called over to the district health office, but I'd already arranged with the state farm director about the sheet iron… And he's not the sort of person you can dilly-dally with: he may not have any left in a day or two. We must fetch it while the iron's hot, so to speak. So I'd like you to go and collect it today. Our head of supplies is on holiday, as you know."

Solodovnikov was about to get upset, but thought better of it and agreed without a fuss.

"Very well."

The first chapter of the *Notebook* would be about ... sheet iron. This would immediately give the reader a clear idea of the circumstances and conditions in which the young doctor had to work.

"But what is the matter with you?" Anna Afanasievna could not help asking again. Her female curiosity was itching to know what could change young people like that overnight. "Have you fallen in love?"

Solodovnikov in his turn gave the head doctor a curious stare.

"Haven't you noticed anything? What's happening in the world outside..."

Anna Afanasievna even looked out of the window.

"What's happening? I don't understand..."

"Not in the yard, but in the world in general..."

"The war in Vietnam..."

"No, that's not what I mean. Okey-dokey, Anna Afanasievna, I'll collect your sheet iron! Where do I have to go?"

"To Obraztsovka, to the farm director, Nikolai Vassilievich Nenarokov. But first you must get a sledge and a workman from the village council. I've arranged for that. Tell Nenarokov we'll give an anti-alcohol lecture at the farm club, you or me. We really must do that. I promised him ages ago. I do like the look of you today, Georgy Nikolayevich. So you're in love, are you?"

"May I take my leave?" Solodovnikov clicked his heels and smiled his confidential smile, as he called it.

"You may."

Solodovnikov went into the corridor. The patch of light had half slid from the wall onto the floor. Solodovnikov trod on it deliberately and stood there for a moment. *"Tempus fugit,"* he thought. Without regret, however, but with a certain delight, as if it meant: "My time has come. Things have started moving!"

Back in his tiny office he got out his address book again and wrote:

"This morning I asked my esteemed Anfas: 'What's happening in the world outside?' Anfas looked conscientiously out of the window, thought for a moment and replied: The war in Vietnam/ 'And what else?' She did not know. But Spring had come."

This was the beginning of Chapter One of the *Notebook.* Solodovnikov liked it. Prose was obviously his forte. Yes, from today, from this very morning, time was on his side. The presentation copy of his book to Anna Afanasievna would contain the following inscription:

"To doubting Thomas for your kindness and learning from the author."

And that would be all. Now for the sheet iron.

They gave him the sledge at the village Soviet, but the workman who was supposed to accompany him hadn't turned up.

"Go and pick him up at home. He lives up there ... where the road turns up the hill after the village shop, see, you just go..."

Solodovnikov drove off to Obraztsovka alone. "Never mind him, I can load it on my own."

It was not far to Obraztsovka, but they'd given him a somewhat dispirited horse who went at a slow pace, and Solodovnikov himself was not in a hurry. The sledge slid along easily until they reached the main road, where the snow was melting. It was harder to pull there and they slowed down to a snail's pace. The sound of the runners grating on the gravel set your teeth on edge; whenever the horse tried to break into a trot, its hooves sent up sprays of dirty melting sludge. The inside of the sledge was bare. Solodovnikov had not thought to ask for an armful of hay to spread out and sprawl on, as he'd seen the peasants do.

As he was leaving the village, Solodovnikov caught sight of a haystack by the houses on the edge. It was fenced off, but a well-trod path led up to it. Solodovnikov stopped the horse and hurried up to the haystack. He climbed through the rough fence and thrust his arms into its sweet-smelling abundance, when an angry shout rang out behind him:

"What the blazes are ye doing? Leave that hay alone!"

Solodovnikov jumped with fright and pulled his arms out of the hay. A strapping young man in a blue shirt, with nothing on his head, was striding towards him along the path. He had a birch stick in his hand.

"I wanted something to sit on..." said Solodovnikov hastily, aware that he sounded cowardly and scared.

"Ye won't feel like sittin' after a taste of this! Summat to sit on! I'll show you..."

"But I'm the doctor here!" Solodovnikov exclaimed in fright. "I only wanted a handful... What's all the fuss about, for heaven's sake!"

"The doctor..." The young man took a closer look at Solodovnikov and seemed to recognise him. "Ye should ask first. If everyone took a handful to sit on, there'd be nowt left to feed my cow. Ye should ask first. We get all sorts drivin' along here."

The man had clearly recognised the doctor now, but he went on ticking him off like a naughty schoolboy, and this made Solodovnikov see red.

"You can keep your wretched hay, for heaven's sake! I only needed a handful... to sit on. But I don't want any now!" Solodovnikov turned round and started walking straight back, not along the path. He sank into the hard, porous snow up to his knees, scratching his ankles and realising how ridiculous it must look to a bystander. Why walk over the snow, when there was a well-trod path? But the young man was standing on the path, and Solodovnikov had to get round him.

"Take some hay!" shouted the man. "Why go away empty-handed?"

"You can keep your old hay!" Solodovnikov shouted back, almost in tears, turning his head abruptly. "You'd kill a man over a bundle of hay, given half the chance!"

The man stared at him in silence.

Solodovnikov reached the sledge, lashed the mare painfully with the reins and drove off. He had read in an article somewhere that the "idiocy of country life" had never existed and, of course, did not exist now. "Idiot himself to write a thing like that," he thought spitefully about the writer.

Solodovnikov's legs were badly scratched and smarting painfully. He decided to go back to the hospital and put some disinfectant on them. But then he stopped and thought better of it. He would ask for some spirit at the farm and rub them with that.

Driving on slowly, he gradually calmed down. Actually that wouldn't be a bad continuation for Chapter One of the *Notebook.* Only he'd better watch out ... go easy on the humour. This wasn't the place for humour and irony. It must sound level-headed and business-like, no playing around. He wasn't planning to amuse people, just to tell them about the tough, everyday, normal if you like, life of a country doctor. Solodovnikov had calmed down completely by now. Only it was very uncomfortable in the hard, cold sledge.

Nikolai Vassilievich Nenarokov was not very old, in his forties, but rather slow (on purpose, it seemed to Solodovnikov) and deliberate. He talked to Solodovnikov for a long time, sizing him up. He found out where the young man had studied, why he had come to these parts (he had been sent there) and whether he planned to stay on when his compulsory three years came to an end... Solodovnikov took an instant dislike to the director. Towards the end he asked rudely:

"What about the iron?"

"You'll get it alright. Don't you like me asking all these questions? I'm just interested. Got a son who'd like to go to medical school too, so I was just testing the ground like. Is it hard to get in?"

"Yes, gets harder each year."

"Then that settles it," said the director. "It's not worth the trouble. Agricultural college would be plain sailing, wouldn't it? And they're crying out for specialists. He'd not be short of work."

Solodovnikov shrugged.

"But if he'd like to..."

"Liking to isn't all that matters. I might like to..." The director looked at the young doctor and did not elaborate on what he "might like to" do. He scribbled a message for the storeman on a piece of paper and handed it to Solodovnikov.

"Here, give this to Morozov in the storeroom. The goggle-eyed one, you'll recognise him. He's probably got a hangover."

"About the lecture... Anna Afanasievna asked me to tell you..."

The director waved a hand.

"Waste of time, those lectures! Come and talk, and I'll order some interesting film."

"What for?" Solodovnikov didn't understand.

"For the lecture."

"But what's the film for?"

"How else could I get an audience? You can give the lecture before we show the film. Otherwise no one'll turn up. What's that?"

"Nothing. I thought they'd come just for the lecture."

"No, they won't," said the director simply and flatly. "Ask for Morozov, head of stores."

Morozov read the director's message carefully and suddenly protested.

"Fifteen sheets? Where from? I ain't got them!" He handed back the piece of paper and looked at the doctor expectantly. "Where from?"

"But you must have!" Solodovnikov cried in dismay. "They arranged it."

"Who?"

"The head doctor and your director."

"Well, if they arranged it, let them give it to ye. I've got no iron." Morozov stuck his hands into his pockets and turned away. He obviously expected something from the doctor, but precisely what Solodovnikov couldn't think for the life of him. "It's all very well for everyone to say 'Give it to him, Morozov,' 'Hand it over, Morozov.' But Morozov's storeroom was full of sweet nothing. How about that?"

"What are we going to do?" asked Solodovnikov.

"I don't know, dear comrade, I don't know. I've got some iron sheets here waiting for Red Dawn farm to collect them." Morozov wheezed into his fist. "Caught me death of cold," he said confidentially, without a trace of anger. "Runnin' round outside all day... I bet the doctor could make me better."

Only then did it dawn upon Solodovnikov that Morozov was after the hair of the dog.

"So there isn't any iron, eh?"

"Yes, there is. For other folk. Not for you."

"Is there a telephone here?"

"What for?"

"I'm going to ring the director. This is disgraceful! I leave my patients to come all this way, and then some character starts messing me about. Where's the telephone?"

Morozov took his hands out of his pockets, narrowed his eyes and gave the green young doctor a nasty look.

"Take it easy, lad, watch it. Not so much of the high-and-mighty talk, if you don't mind."

"Where's the telephone?" Solodovnikov shouted, amazed at his own cheek. "I'll give you high-and-mighty. With knobs on. We'll find those sheets, never fear... I'm going to ring up the district party committee, not the director. Where's the phone?"

Morozov went under an awning and pulled off some roofing paper. There lay the sheets of iron.

"Count off fifteen," he said calmly, "and tell us what yer name is."

"Solodovnikov, Georgy Nikolayevich."

"Ye'II have to answer for the character, as ye put it."

"I will."

"If any young whipper-snapper thinks he can come along and call people names..."

"And you'll have to pay for the whipper-snapper. What are you hinting at? That the state entrusts the lives of its subjects to young whipper-snappers?"

"Alright, alright," said Morozov. But he clearly didn't like the turn things were taking.

Solodovnikov drove the sledge up to the stacks and began throwing sheets of iron into the sledge.

Morozov stood next to him, counting.

"Cheery-bye," said Solodovnikov, when he had counted off fifteen. And away he drove.

Morozov was covering the stacks with the roofing paper and did not look round at him.

Solodovnikov drove off in fine spirits. Only he was still very uncomfortable in the sledge. Particularly now that it was full of iron. He decided to sit on the edge, but it was freezing cold.

On the way back it was all melting by now, and the horse had a hard time pulling the heavy sledge over the squelching mass of snow, earth and stones.

"That'll teach him!" thought Solodovnikov, pleased with himself. "That's the way I'll do things in future." He had an unpleasant memory of the man with the stick, but tried to put that out of his mind.

But, alas, either because the sledge was dragging along so slowly or from the pettiness of the day's events and stupid clashes, Solodovnikov's high spirits and satisfaction gradually seeped away. He began to feel indifferent to the lovely sunny day and the vast expanses where the wet spring stretched out in all its splendour, indifferent to the smells and sounds and patches of light. Alright it was spring, but so what? Was he supposed to go prancing about like a goat? It would be much more fun that evening, though. Five or six of them had agreed

to get together and play forfeits for kisses. There'd be music and drinks. And that snub-nosed giggly girl who taught German would be there. She may giggle a lot, but she was a clever lass. Read lots of books and had left some interesting friends in the town.

At the thought of her the young doctor's heart leapt. It really did leap and no mistake. Of course, she was a bit vulgar, with an upturned nose like that. By the time she was thirty it would be up on her forehead. And snub-nosed girls often get broad in the beam later on. But she still had a long way to go to thirty!

Solodovnikov whipped on the horse.

It took him some time to unload the iron at the hospital, take the horse back to the village Soviet and then return to the hospital again. Solodovnikov could feel how tired he was. His hands were shaking. He washed them in his tiny office and was about to visit the girl with the meniscus, then decided to go in the morning. The cleaner came in and said that the phone kept ringing and Anna Afanasievna wasn't back yet.

"Never mind. Just say she's out."

"P'raps ye'd go and listen to 'em. They keep askin' for the doctor."

Solodovnikov went into the head doctor's office, sat down by the telephone waiting for it to ring, then picked up the receiver.

"Hospital, Solodovnikov here. She's at the district. Oh, it's you, is it? Yes, I got it. Fifteen sheets, just as you said. Thank you... The lecture? No, today's no good. No. I can't... I'm busy, and I don't know when Anna Afanasievna will be back.

No, I'm busy. I'll leave her a message... What time is the film? I'll make a note of that. Goodbye."

Solodovnikov put down the receiver and sat there for a bit. Then he actually did go into the ward to see the girl with the meniscus. He looked at her foot, had a word with her, gave her a jolly pat on her flushed cheek and joked with her. Then he had a word with the other patients, listened to their just, tedious remarks, told them it was spring outside and went away. Returning to his tiny office, he looked at his watch and saw that it was a quarter to three. He could push off now. He took off his white coat and adjusted his tie in front of the mirror... Then he lit a cigarette. Fingering the address book in his pocket, he grinned as he remembered the poem, but did not read it through again, and put the diary into a drawer, right at the back. Then he left the hospital.

He returned the same way he had come in the morning, carefully avoiding the puddles and greeting people he met in a polite and dignified manner (it was amazing how quickly he had learnt to be dignified, almost without realising it), but did not stop to talk to anyone.

"Yes, the snub-nosed one has got something," Solodovnikov thought. "That's for sure. But perhaps she takes herself a bit too seriously for someone who giggles all the time. She's saving herself up... So she'll let you play around, but no more. No, no more."

BOOTS

They made a trip into town for spare parts and Sergei Dukhanin went into a shop and saw a smashing pair of ladies' boots. And that put an end to his peace of mind because he suddenly wanted to buy those boots for his wife. Just for once, he thought, I could give her a real treat. Something really beautiful. And those boots are it. She has never had a pair like that even in her dreams.

Sergei spent some time admiring the boots, then flicked the glass of the shop counter with his finger-nail and asked cheerfully, "How much do you want for those dazzlers?"

"What dazzlers?" the salesgirl questioned blankly.

"Those over there—the boots."

"Dazzlers... Sixty-five rubles."

Bloody hell! Sergei opened his mouth to say it, but in fact said, "Aye, and they've got a sting in them too."

The salesgirl eyed him with scorn. Snooty lot, these shopgirls. Even if it was only a bag of millet they were selling you, they'd do it as if they were paying back a forgotten debt.

Still, never mind them. Sergei had sixty-five rubles on him. In fact, he had seventy-five. But... He went out into the street, lit a cigarette and started thinking. You had to face it, of course, those boots weren't really the thing for country mud. True, she'd be careful with them. Put them

on about once a month to go out in. And never in the mud, only when it was dry. But think of the joy! What a moment it would be when he took the boots out of his case and said, "These are for you."

Sergei went to a stall not far from the shop and queued for beer.

He pictured his wife's eyes shining at the sight of those boots. She could be just like a kid sometimes, happy to the point of tears. And she was a fine girl anyway. They have plenty to put up with, our wives do, Sergei thought to himself. It's bad enough for them with our booze-ups as it is to say nothing of the kids and the house to look after. It must take some guts to stand it. We men can get away from it all for a bit—at work or having a drink with someone. That gives us a break. But they're at it from morning to night, all the hours that are made.

The queue was moving slowly. Those who had been served already kept bringing up their mugs for a "refill". Sergei continued to ponder.

Of course it's not as if she was going about barefoot. It's not as bad as all that! Why make out it is? She's as well shod as the rest of the village. They're nice to look at, of course, but they're more than we can afford. If I did get her a pair she is sure enough to start scolding. What's the good of them to me, she'd say, at that price? You ought to have got something for the girls, an overcoat or something-winter's coming on.

At last Sergei's turn came round. He took two mugs of beer, found himself a quiet corner and began sipping slowly, thinking the while.

Yes, that's the way you've been living for forty-five years. You keep on thinking to yourself one day things will ease up a bit and we'll enjoy ourselves. But the years go by till all of a sudden you'll be ready for the grave, and then you'll realise you've spent all your life waiting for something. But why the hell should we wait? Why not give joy when you get the chance? And here it is. You've got the money, there's a smashing pair of boots going, so take them and make someone happy! You might never have another chance. The girls haven't reached the marrying age yet, they can make do without anything special. But this is the chance of a lifetime.

Sergei went back to the shop.

"Well, let's have a look at 'em," he said.

"What?"

"Those boots."

"What do you want to look at them for? What size do you need?"

"I don't know the size. I'll guess from the look of 'em."

"Fancy shopping without knowing the size. They have to be tried on, they're not bedroom slippers."

"I can see that from the price."

"So there's no point in looking at them, is there?"

"Suppose I want to buy them?"

"How can you when you don't even know the size?"

"What's that to you? I want to have a look at 'em."

"You're wasting your time. If everyone has a look just for the sake of looking..."

"Now listen here, my dear," Sergei snapped, losing his temper. "I'm not asking you to show me your knickers because I don't want to see them, but I am asking you to show me the boots you have on this counter."

"Don't you be rude in here! You drink yourself stupid, and then off you go..."

"Who's going off where? How do you know what I've had to drink? You haven't bought me any, have you?"

The salesgirl threw down one boot in front of him. Sergei took it, turned it over in his hands, felt the leather, flicked the flossy sole with his finger-nail, and carefully slipped his hand into its soft, caressing depths.

Soft as a featherbed, he thought joyfully.

"Sixty-five exactly?" he asked.

The salesgirl stared at him in silent fury.

Good lord, she hates me, Sergei reflected in astonishment. The silly bitch!

"I'll take them," he said hurriedly. At least that would mollify her a bit and make her realise he wasn't bothering her for nothing. "Do I pay you or at the desk?"

Still staring at him, the girl said quietly, "At the desk."

"Sixty-five exactly or plus some kopeks?"

The girl went on staring at him and, when Sergei looked more closely into her eyes, he saw that they really were white with hatred. Losing his nerve, he asked no more questions, put down the boot and went to pay at the cash desk.

What's biting her? Is she crazy or what—getting so het up? She won't live long at that rate.

The price turned out to be exactly sixty-five rubles. Sergei gave the salesgirl the receipt from the cash desk. Not daring to look into her eyes, he let his gaze rest on a point just above her flat chest. Not exactly brimming over with health, he thought pityingly.

But the girl stood staring at him without taking the receipt. Sergei looked up and saw that her eyes now expressed both hatred and an odd kind of satisfaction.

"Give me the boots, please."

"At the wrapping counter," she said quietly.

"Where's that?" Sergei asked, also quietly, feeling that he himself was beginning to hate this flat-chested salesgirl.

She stared without answering.

"Where is the wrapping counter?" Sergei smiled straight into her eyes. "Eh? Don't look at me like that, dear—I'm married. I know I'm the kind they all fall for, but what's the use? You'll just have to put up with it, that's all. Now, where did you say that wrapping counter was?" The girl's small mouth opened in surprise. It was too much for her.

Sergei went off to look for the wrapping counter.

Oh, he breathed out, I never knew I had it in me. Fancy taking it out of her like that! Still, that'll teach her not to get mad for nothing. Standing there in such a temper.

He collected the boots and went back to the transport depot for the journey home (they had driven into town in their lorries, two other drivers and a mechanic).

Sergei walked into the watch office, imagining that everyone would want to know at once what he had in his box. The box attracted no attention. No one took any notice of him either. As usual, they were arguing. In town they had seen a young priest walking along the street and now they were trying to work out how much the blighter earned. Vitka Kibyakov, pale and pock-marked, with big mournful eyes, was outshouting the others. Even while he was bawling his head off and insulting everyone else, his eyes retained their perpetual look of melancholy wisdom, as though they were watching Vitka himself in hopeless sorrow.

"Don't you know he has a chauffeur-driven car?!" the File was shouting (Vitka had been nicknamed the File). "Even while they're in training, they get a grant of a hundred and fifty a month! Understand? A grant!"

"They do have cars, that's true, but not the young ones. What are you trying to tell me? The ones that have chauffeur-driven cars are these—the apostles? No, not apostles—what are they called?"

"Hear that? The apostles have chauffeur-driven cars! There's a dimwit for you! You're an apostle yourself!"

"A grant of a hundred and fifty? Then how much are the wages?"

"D'you think he's going to be persecuted for nothing? He must get five hundred rubles minimum."

"But he must be a believer."

"If your salary is five hundred rubles, you can be a believer. I'd be a believer too if I got that much."

"Imagine him a believer."

Sergei didn't want to get involved, though he could have argued if he had wanted to. Five hundred rubles a month for a young priest. That was certainly too much. But he had no desire to argue about that just now. He wanted to show them the boots. He took them out of the box and started examining them. Now they'd shut up about their blooming priest. This would keep them quiet. But it didn't. They just glanced. One of the drivers held out his hand and Sergei passed him the boot. The driver (Sergei didn't know him) took it, also felt the leather, and flicked the sole with an iron finger-nail. Then he tried to put his dirty paw into its snow-white^ feather-soft inside. Sergei took the boot away.

"Where are you pushing your great piston?"

The driver laughed.

"Who's it for?"

"My wife."

Then they did shut up. .

"Who?" the File asked.

"For Klavka."

"Let's see it."

The boot was passed round. They all fingered the leather top and flicked the sole, but no one ventured to feel inside. They only pinched open

the top and peered into the white, fluffy depths. One of them even blew inside for some reason. Sergei experienced an unfamiliar sense of pride.

"How much were they?"

"Sixty-five."

They all stared at Sergei in astonishment. He felt slightly confused.

"Are you crackers?"

Sergei took the boot away from the File.

"Well, Sergei's done it this time!" the File proclaimed. "What's the good of them to her?"

"She'll wear them!"

Sergei wanted to be calm and sure of himself, but he was quivering inwardly. And the thought that the price of the boots represented half a motor-scooter had lodged stubbornly in his brain. *Half a motor-scooter. Half a motor-scooter.* He knew it was not half, or anywhere near half, but the thought persisted. *Half a motor-scooter.*

"Did she tell you to buy them?"

"Why should she tell me? I just bought them."

"When will she wear them?" they questioned Sergei cheerfully. "Everywhere knee-deep in mud and he turns up with boots that cost sixty-five rubles!

"They're winter boots."

"But where can you go in them in winter?"

"And anyway they're for a town girl's leg. Klavka's won't get into them—that's for sure. What size does she take? They'd just about fit on her nose, and that's all."

"What size does she take?"

"Oh, go to..!" Sergei lost his temper completely. "Why should you care anyhow?"

Another burst of laughter.

"We're sorry, Sergei, old chap! After all, you didn't pick up that sixty-five rubles in the street, did you?"

"It's me that earned it and me that spent it, and that's all there is to it."

"She told you to get rubber ones, I suppose?"

"Rubber my foot!.." Sergei was on edge. "You'd do better to talk about the priest and the wages he gets."

"More than you do."

"Look at the bastards counting other people's money." Sergei stood up. "Have you got nothing better to do?"

"What are you getting all hot under the collar for? You've slipped up and we've told you about it, that's all. No need to get worked up."

"Me? No! I'm not worked up. It's you that's worrying your heart out over me! Real old worry-guts, aren't you? Anyone'd think I'd borrowed the money off him. What are you sitting there worrying for? Sits there worrying, the poor bugger, till he's blue in the face."

"I worry because I can't stick the sight of fools. I feel sorry for them ..."

"Sorry my eye! He's sorry!"

"Yes, I am."

"Go and get your face back to normal."

"And you come with me, eh? Give those boots a send-off."

They kept it up for a bit longer, then set off for home.

On the way home Sergei was finally vanquished by the mechanic (they travelled in the same lorry).

"What did she give you the money for?" the mechanic asked. He put the question without malice. "For something else?"

Sergei respected the mechanic, so he kept his temper.

"No, nothing else. Let's drop it."

They arrived in the village towards evening.

Sergei wasted no time on goodbyes or going for a swig of vodka to celebrate their homecoming. He went home.

When he arrived, Klavdia and the girls were having supper.

"You're late back, aren't you?" Klavdia said. "I thought you'd be staying the night."

"Well, by the time we'd picked the stuff up and taken it to the depot, and by the time they'd parcelled it out for the various districts..."

"Didn't you buy anything, dad?" his elder daughter, Grusha,asked.

"What, for instance?" Sergei asked. On the way home he had decided that if Klavdia started snapping at him and saying they were too dear and he ought to have bought something else, he'd just go straight to the well and throw the boots down it.

"Well, something. Anything?"

"Yes, I did."

All three turned and looked at him from the table. The way he'd said that "Yes, I did" clearly indicated that it wasn't a four-ruble head-square

or a meat-grinder that the master of the house had bought. They turned and waited.

"I'm not the master of my own house, somehow," thought Sergei at that moment. "I sit here dumbstruck, dammit. What for?"

"It's in my case." Sergei sat down on a chair and fumbled for his cigarettes. He was so nervous his hands were trembling.

Klavdia lifted the box out of the case, and the boots looked up at her out of the box... by electric light they were even more dazzling. They seemed to be laughing there in that box. His daughters jumped up from the table, oohing and aahing.

"Gracious me! Who're they for?"

"Who d'you think? You of course!"

"Goodness gracious!.." The slipper flew off Klavdia's foot. The bed creaked as she plumped herself down on it...

One of those smart city boots slid boldly on to the sturdy peasant leg—and then stuck, Sergei felt a stab of anguish. It wouldn't go on. The top was too tight.

"What size are they?"

"Thirty-eight."

No, it wouldn't go on. Sergei stood up, took a grip on the boot and tried to pull it. No good.

"And they're my size."

"This is where they're tight—in the calf."

"I've got such awful big legs!"

"Just a minute! Try putting on a very thin stocking. "

"What's the use! Can't you see?"

"Yes, I can..."

"Oh, bother! What a big leg I've got!"

The excitement died down.

"Oh, dear!" Klavdia sighed. "What a leg to have! How much were they?"

"Sixty-five." Sergei lighted a cigarette. He thought Klavdia had not heard the price. "They cost sixty-five rubles."

Klavdia looked at the boot, mechanically stroking the smooth top with her palm. Tears shone in her eyes, on her lashes... Yes, she had heard the price well enough.

"Oh, bother these legs of mine!" she said. "For once in my life I'm lucky except that they don't fit! Oh, dear, oh, dear!"

Sergei felt another stab of pain, of pity, of love, somewhat neglected. He put his hand on his wife's as it stroked the boot, and squeezed it. Klavdia looked up at him. Their eyes met. Klavdia gave a shy little laugh and shook her head as she used to before, when she was young, in a mischievous, mannish way, but with pride and self-respect.

"Well, Grusha, you're in luck." She held out the boot to her daughter. "Try it on now."

The girl was overwhelmed.

"That's right!" said Sergei, and shook his head as his wife had done. "If you finish your tenth class well, they're yours."

Klavdia burst out laughing.

...Before going to bed Sergei usually sat for a while on a low stool by the kitchen door and smoked his last cigarette. That night he did the same. He sat there, smoking and thinking, or rather not thinking, but reliving the experience of his shopping expedition, trying to comprehend its

unexpected and, so it seemed to him now, profound meaning. He felt light at heart. It would be a pity if something now were to spoil such a good mood, such a rare, treasured moment.

Klavdia was making up the bed. "Aren't you coming!" she called.

He waited on purpose, to see what she would say next.

"Sergei, love!"

Sergei rose, spat on the stub of his cigarette and went inside, smiling to himself and shaking his head. But he didn't think, so that's what made her sweet-buying those boots. No, it wasn't because of the boots. That wasn't it. It was because, because... Never mind. It was good.

THE BIG BOSS

Mishka Tolstykh, a carpenter at Construction and Assembly Firm No. 7, a small man with a prominent jaw and long arms, a Muscovite who had grown up on the far side of mighty Lake Baikal, was returning home after a visit to his brother in Leningrad. His brother had not received him well. As soon as he arrived, his brother had proceeded to give him long lectures on how he ought to be living his life... Terribly offended by this behavior, Mishka got drunk on the spot, said some ugly things to his brother's wife, and left.

He got to the train earlier than anyone else, walked into his sleeping compartment, tossed his suitcase on the top berth, and went to ask the conductor for some linens and a blanket. But she informed him: "You won't get all that until after we leave the station." So Mishka went back to his compartment, took off his shoes, stretched out on the cotton batting mattress he found on the top berth, and fell asleep.

He woke up late that night and heard two men conversing quietly in the darkness below. One voice was familiar, and that familiar voice was doing most of the talking, so Mishka began to eavesdrop.

"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly," the voice intoned softly. "I can't agree with you there. Sometimes I call one of those bastards into my office and ask, 'Well, what are we going to do?'

He doesn't answer. 'What are we going to do?' He keeps his mouth shut and shrugs his shoulders. 'Are you going to keep it up, or is that the end of it?' The silence of the grave."

"Yes. They are good at keeping their mouths shut," the other voice, tired and no longer young, agreed. "They can do that for sure."

"Like the cat's got their tongues, no less. So I ask, 'Well, how long are we going to play this little game?' "

Mishka recalled who the familiar voice from below reminded him of: Semyon Ivanovich Malafeikin, his neighbor from apartment building No. 37 in Moscow, and not one of his favorite people. Malafeikin was a house-painter— a disabled pensioner who did a lot of moonlighting. Mishka had even done a bit of moonlighting with him once. They had repainted an apartment that belonged to one of the big bosses. They had worked evenings together for a week and a half, and during all that time, Malafeikin had said perhaps a dozen words. He didn't even say hello when he turned up for work. As an explanation for his silence, he proffered the following: "Running my mouth makes my chest hurt." Of course, the fellow below wasn't Malafeikin, but the voice was strikingly similar.

'"I'll have you run out of Moscow up a rail, you bastard!'" I tell him. '"If you try my patience too much, I'll have you thrown out of the city!' 'Don't do that!' he pleads. 'So you can talk, can you!'"

"Do you really have them thrown out of town?"

"Not often. I feel sorry for the poor sots. What will they do if I have them thrown out of town?"

"Oh, that's no problem. We need lots of workers where I come from!"

"What will you do with them—set up your own private distillery?"

The two men gave a soft administrative chuckle that was full of anxiety.

"Well, we've got our share of bootleggers, to be honest. What do you do about that little problem your way?"

"The same as everybody—a little preventive medicine plus the militia. Doesn't do much good, though. A tiresome business, that. I go out to my country house and light a fire in the fireplace. Then I stare at the flames. That's something I love to do by the way—to watch the fire. Then all of a sudden, I see some obnoxious mug peering at me out of the flames, and I think, 'dear God, when will you ever leave me alone'?!"

"What do you mean, peering at you? Is it your imagination, or what?" asked his tired interlocutor in puzzlement.

"I spend so much time looking at them day in and day out that I see them everywhere I go. Is your country house made of brick, by the way?"

"I don't have one at all. Whenever I have a bit of free time, I go out to the village where I grew up. It's not far away at all. Is your country house made of brick?"

"Of course, and it's two storeys high. You really should get yourself one—it's so nice to go out to the countryside at the end of the day when you're

exhausted and light a fire. It's good for the nerves."

"Is it yours?"

"The country house?"

"Yes."

"Why, of course not! Belongs to the state. And it's the state that looks after it. And I've got two drivers assigned to me. So when it's a quarter to five one of them is sure to call: 'Are you going home, Semyon Ivanovich?' And I say: 'Yes, Petya, I'm going home.' I say home when I want to go to the country house, not when I want to go to my apartment in town."

Mishka's eyes almost popped out of his head up there on the top berth. So this man's name was Semyon Ivanovich, too, just like Malafeikin. What was going on here?

But Semyon Ivanovich was continuing his tale down below.

"So I say, 'Home, Petya, home. The hell with Moscow and all this hustle and bustle!' Then I go out to my country house and lay a nice fire in the fireplace."

"Don't you have any servants to do it for you?"

"Of course—plenty of them, but I like to do it myself! I lay the fire myself, then light it—such a wonderful feeling! You know, sometimes I think: What the hell do I need with all these honors and medals and the huge pension I'll be entitled to! I'd be just as happy living in some village and lighting up my stove every day.'"

His tired interlocutor gave a quiet chuckle of disbelief.

"You don't believe me, do you?" objected Semyon Ivanovich, probably also with a smile. "I'm dead serious. I could leave it all in a heartbeat!"

"So why don't you?"

"It's not as simple as it might seem. Who would let someone like me leave just like that?!"

"I see what you mean," said the other with a sigh. "Sometimes I also..."

"No one will let me leave. They're trying to give me another promotion. But I don't want it. I've already got more than enough headaches, thank you."

"Were you in Leningrad for that special conference? I heard something about it..."

"No, I'm in another line of work. We've got plenty of problems of our own, though. Do you go to that village of yours in the summer, too?"

"Almost always. I do a lot of fishing with my father."

"Not me. I go to a health resort."

"Where, in Kislovodsk?"

"Sometimes I go there and sometimes to the Black Sea."

"Do you stay in the central building of the big government resort there?"

"Oh no. We have a private building of our own."

"Where?"

"Just before you get to the town proper."

"Tell me where it is. Maybe I've seen it. I've been all over Kislovodsk."

"No, you've never seen our building, I'm sure. You can't see it from the road," said Semyon Ivanovich with a laugh.

They both fell silent for a moment, then Semyon Ivanovich added by way of explanation: "Because of the high fence around it, you see."

"I see," his exhausted interlocutor added somehow indefinitely then fell silent again.

For some reason, this silence seemed to disturb Semyon Ivanovich greatly.

"It's pretty boring there, to be perfectly honest," he continued. "Of course, there's always champagne and plenty of fresh fruit at the buffet. Whatever you want, really. But that's not the point. I get tired of the same old thing year after year."

"Sure," agreed the tired one vaguely. "That's fine by me... Do they show films?"

"Yes, of course. But we usually ignore the regular ones. We get a bunch of just the guys together and watch something a little bit spicy, you know? With some naked girls. Don't you like films with a little spice?" Semyon Ivanovich laughed uncertainly. "They're not bad, you know."

The other man did not react to this in any way whatsoever. He remained silent.

"Well?" asked Semyon Ivanovich anxiously.

"What?" said his interlocutor.

"You mean you don't like girly flicks?"

"To tell the truth, I haven't seen that many of them."

"You don't say! They're really good fun. Some sweet young thing comes out wiggling her—well, you know— her... Can't take your eyes off her! It's really something!"

"And is she completely naked?!"

"Naked as a jay bird!"

"Do they make films like that in our country?"

The anxiety which had seized Semyon Ivanovich a moment before dissipated, and he chortled with genuine pleasure.

"They're foreign films—not ours!"

"Oh, yes. I see/ the other replied. "But of course!"

"Those devils sure know how to do it! You have to give them that. Every girl pretty as a picture!"

"I didn't say anything!" his interlocutor replied fearfully.

"But probably you condemn me in your heart of hearts."

"Me? No, not at all."

"Oh yes you have, but don't be too quick to judge me, because many's the night I've sat so long at my desk and worked so hard I just fell asleep right where I was sitting. That's how thorough I am when I study a case. May I be honest with you?"

"Why? I understand perfectly well," his interlocutor hastened to add, no trace of tiredness in his voice. "Many's the time..."

"I'm sure. In fact, I'm certain there are plenty of times you don't get enough sleep and you don't even have time to eat. Yours is a hard lot, toiling as you do! But then you turn and point an accusing finger and say—'Look at that hot shot with a pot belly!' But you don't see any pot belly on me, do you?"

"By no means!" his interlocutor remarked in utter confusion. "I didn't mean anything when I... That's not the point at all..."

"What is then?" asked Semyon Ivanovich harshly.

"Well..."

"Well, what?"

"The point is that we all have the same ultimate goal, don't we?"

"You don't say! I really had no idea! And do you mean absolutely everyone?"

The other kept his peace.

"Come on, say something," Semyon Ivanovich said. For some unexpected reason he had grown angry.

His companion said nothing.

"Why don't you answer? Keeping your mouth shut too?"

"Listen here," said the tired man, obviously rising from his berth. "What is going on here? What do you have against me?"

"God forbid I should have anything against you!" Semyon Ivanovich hastened to say with utter sincerity. "I have absolutely nothing whatsoever against you. I was just asking. I thought you might have something against me. Do you?"

"Of course not. We should be getting to bed, actually. About what time is it?"

"I can't tell you exactly, because I left my watch with the illuminated dial at home. It's about two in the morning, I would imagine."

"Yes, I guess so. It's time to get some sleep."

"I agree, especially since I had a little nip today when I was saying goodbye to my friends. Let's get some shut-eye."

They fell silent immediately: no one said another word.

Mishka didn't know what to think: who was that down there? The man's voice resembled his neighbor Malafeikin's quite remarkably, and his name was Semyon Ivanovich, too. But what was going on then? Mishka knew almost everything about Malafeikin one could possibly know about one's neighbor without really trying to find out. Once Malafeikin had fallen from a scaffolding and hurt himself badly... He had lived alone then, and he was still alone. Quiet and laconic. On Sundays, a woman who was older than he came to visit. She brought a little girl with her. But Mishka had no idea what their relation was to his neighbor. Malafeikin would go outside with the little girl. She would play in the sandbox, and he would sit reading the paper. The woman was probably his sister and the little girl, her daughter. Somehow, that seemed the most likely explanation. Basically, that was all there was to know about Malafeikin. But what about the big boss down there on the lower berth? Well, that had to be a coincidence—nothing more. Such things did happen, after all...

Mishka climbed carefully down from his berth and went to the toilet. He returned, got back in bed very quietly, and closed his eyes. There was silence in the compartment, and Mishka fell asleep.

In the morning, Mishka woke up later than the rest, when the train was already on the outskirts of Moscow. He opened his eyes, looked down, and who should he see sitting by the window but

his neighbor, Semyon Ivanovich Malafeikin. Another man was sitting by the window on the other side. He was about fifty and had very red cheeks.

Both were looking out the window. A young woman in slacks was sitting off to the side reading a book. No one was saying a word.

Mishka's first inclination was to exclaim: "Howdy, neighbor!" from above, but then he remembered the conversation of the night before. He jerked his head back in a hurry and paused to think matters over. Perhaps the conversation had never taken place. Perhaps he had been dreaming.

While he was racking his brains, the red-cheeked fellow stretched and said in the manner of someone who had been is lent for a long-time:

"It looks like we're almost there." There came a rustling sound—perhaps of a newspaper being rolled up—and with that, the man rose and left the compartment.

Mishka hung his head over the edge of the berth... The young woman glanced at him, then at the window, then went back to her reading. Malafeikin was pug-nosed and had tiny, beady eyes with no lashes. Wearing a tie, his hair neatly parted and combed, Malafeikin sat drumming the fingers of his right hand on the table and looking out the window.

"Morning, Boss!" Mishka said softly from above.

Malafeikin's head snapped up in the direction of the sound, and their eyes met. Malafeikin's

tiny eyes opened wide with amazement, and even —or so it seemed to Mishka— with fear.

"Oh!" Malafeikin said with disapproval. "What ill wind has blown you here?"

Mishka looked at his neighbor in silence, trying to muster an expression of irony.

"What's all this wandering about the wide world?" Malafeikin intoned with what seemed like malice. He darted a glance at the door.

Sure as anything, it had been him bragging about a two-storey country house and complaining about how tired he was of medals and honors.

"What kind of tall tales were you spinning last night?" Mishka began, but just then, the red-cheeked fellow came back, and Malafeikin jumped up from his berth, turned to him, and said:

"Well, it looks like we're almost there." He glanced out the window and patted his parting with a businesslike air to make sure it was straight. "Yes, we're crossing the Yauza. My, my..." He turned to leave the compartment, but bent over his suitcase.

"What a sharp operator he is!" Mishka thought to himself in amazement. He could see from his vantage point that Malafeikin's ears had turned crimson. He decided not to torment his fellow moonlighter any more, but simply observed him with great interest.

"Are you headed for downtown?" inquired the red-cheeked passenger with a respectful glance at Malafeikin.

"Who me?" Malafeikin sputtered. "Why, no. I'm not. Not at all. I'm going another place entirely."

•"Too bad. I thought I might be able to catch a ride with you."

"Sorry. I'm headed in the opposite direction."

'The two of us are headed home to Sviblovo," Mishka announced loudly, then stretched and sat up on his berth. Suddenly, he burst out laughing.

"Oh, ho! Our fellow-traveller has awakened," said the red-cheeked passenger. "Good morning, young man! I envy you your sound slumber. I can hardly sleep a wink on trains. I tell myself it's silly not to get some shut-eye while I have the chance, but it doesn't help."

Mishka gazed at Malafeikin with a smile.

"I could sleep another ten hours, and it wouldn't bother me a bit."

"Ah, to be young again!"

Malafeikin closed his creaky yellow suitcase, fastened the belts, picked it up, and stepped into the corridor with it. Then, without returning to the compartment, he reached in and took his leather coat from the hanger, pulled his hat down from the shelf, and moved as far away from the door as he could.

"He's running scared! Afraid I'll spill the beans!" Mishka realized. "But why should I waste my time on him?!"

Malafeikin did not return to their compartment. Rather, after he put his coat on, he headed for the exit.

However, once they were on the platform, Mishka caught up with his neighbor and walked alongside him.

"Were you boozing last night, eh?" asked Mishka in his friendliest manner. "What was all that you were carrying on about? Whatever possessed you?"

"Leave me alone!" Malafeikin snapped suddenly, turning beet-red. "Why are you pestering me? Are you drunk yourself? Do you have a hangover? You'd better go and sober up instead of bugging me!"

People began to look at them. Some even slowed their pace in hopes of witnessing a row.

Mishka was afraid of having to provide anyone with an explanation—especially the militia. So he slowed down and let Malafeikin walk ahead—but he didn't let his neighbor out of his sight. He was furious at the man.

They got on the same subway car, and Mishka kept a close watch on Malafeikin. Still he had no idea how to make the best of the opportunity to needle his neighbor. At the slightest provocation, Malafeikin would surely call the militia.

Malafeikin glanced cautiously about the car and met up against Mishka's persistent, devastating gaze. Mishka gave him a wink, and Malafeikin's ears flushed red as poppies. He raised the stiff collar of his leather coat, pulled his hat down, and didn't look around any more.

On the escalator leading out of the subway, Mishka approached his neighbor again and whispered into his ear:

"Don't start yelling your head off... I just have one question for you, and then I won't bother you any more. I promise. Listen—I have a brother in Leningrad who's just like you—always trying to

make himself out to be something he's not. What I want to know is, what makes you do it? What do you get out of it? I'm serious. I really want to know."

But Malafeikin said not a word in reply. He just stared straight ahead.

"Do you feel better after the show?"

Malafeikin didn't reply.

"Why did you tell that man a pack of lies last night? Huh?"

When the escalator was about to spit them out of the bowels of the subway, Malafeikin began to look around for a militia man. Mishka rushed ahead of him, glanced around, and reached the bus stop before his neighbor.

"I'll grab him by the short hairs once we reach home," he decided.

When they got off the bus, Mishka was about to walk up to Malafeikin again when his neighbor cringed with agony and shook his head so hard his hat almost flew off. He stamped his feet and shouted:

"Don't you dare come near me! Let me be! Go away!"

He shouted like a madman and stormed off, making a bee-line for their apartment building. His big yellow suitcase with the two belts around it banged against his leg. His leather coat flapped and rustled pleasantly. Malafeikin righted his hat with his left hand as he strode forward. He didn't look back—not even once.

Suddenly, Mishka began to feel sorry for him.

"Fibber!" he said softly to himself. "He's got a house in the country, you see—with a fireplace,

no less, you see., What a fibber! Big shots like him know how to live, if you please!"

And with that, Mishka set off for the store to buy some cigarettes. He had run out, you see.

THE SORROWS OF YOUNG VAGANOV

Young Georgy Vaganov, a young law graduate and young investigator at the district public prosecutor's office, was on top of the world that morning. The day before he had received a letter... Thrice young, he expected everything from life, everything, that is, except that letter. Maya Yakutina had been in the same year as him at law school, a proud girl with chiselled features. Neither then, when they were students, nor now, when he wanted to picture Maya in his mind, could Vaganov avoid an insidious and irritating comparison. Maya was like a wooden doll fashioned by a skilled master. Yet the very fact that she was like a doll, an exquisite doll, made her attractive, in some inexplicable way, suggesting that she was a woman too, capable of cooking the dinner and of bestowing joy that no one else could bestow. In other words, she was a woman like all other women, and also as exquisite as a doll. Georgy Vaganov wanted to analyse the whole thing, but actually there was nothing to analyse; he was just in love with her, Maya Yakutina. Four boys in their year had been in love with her. She had ditched the lot of them by getting married just before finals. To some brilliant physicist, people said. "She was a pretty girl, but on the make. Pretty girls are all the same," they all decided. But Vaganov couldn't bring himself to blame Maya or feel slighted. Firstly, he had no right to and, secondly, blame

her for what? Vaganov had always known that Maya was not for him. It was a pity, of course... But perhaps it wasn't a pity, perhaps it was a good thing. If he'd been given Maya, like a gift from the gods, it would soon have been the end of him. He would have turned into a creep straightaway: he would have wanted to stay in the town at any price and agreed to the role of a dogsbody. Just so he could yap around Maya, without being on a lead. Yes, however you looked at it, it was all for the best, as they say. This was how Vaganov tried to calm himself down, when he finally realised he hadn't got a chance. And he succeeded. Or thought he had succeeded. But now it transpired that people don't calm down in matters such as these. Yesterday, when he got the letter and saw it was from Maya, he couldn't believe his eyes. But the letter was from Maya... His heart started beating so fast that he thought quite seriously: "This must be how people faint." And in the least daunted by this, he just left the landlord's section of the house and went to his living room. Burning with a delicious presentiment, he read the letter through, stroked it, put it up to the light and looked at it, and all but kissed it. He was too embarrassed to do that, although he did feel the urge at first to kiss the letter all over. Vaganov had grown up in the countryside, with a strict father and a mother who was always busy, always hard at work. He'd seen little affection and was shy of it, particularly of kisses, for some reason.

Maya wrote that her marriage had "cracked up", that now she was free and wanted to use her

vacation to travel round the country a bit. In this connection she asked: "Dear Georgy, for old time's sake please meet me at the station and let me stay at your place for a week—I've been longing to see that part of the world for some time. May I come?" She went on to say that she'd had a chance to think over her own life and the life around her and now she understood, for example, why he, Georgy, had worked so hard and agreed so quickly to take a job in such an outlandish place. "Now then, steady on, old girl, steady on," young Vaganov thought happily. "Don't start counting your chickens just yet."

So with this letter nestling in his pocket young Vaganov was now walking to the office. He would have to write back to Maya either at work, if there was time, or at home that evening. He searched for the words and expressions he would need in his letter, a letter that must be simple, generous and intelligent. Searched for them, found them, rejected them and began searching again... And all the time his heart was bubbling: "Will she really be mine? It's not the countryside she wants to see, is it? She doesn't give a damn about that..."

Pondering this fascinating question of such vital interest to him, Vaganov walked into his office, took out some sheets of paper and was about to start writing his reply. Just at that moment the door gave a slow unpleasant whine. And a shaven head peeped cautiously round it, the head of the man he had seen a minute or two ago sitting on the couch in the corridor.

"C'n I come in?"

Vaganov hesitated for a moment, then said with barely concealed annoyance.

"Very well then."

"Good morning." The man was about fifty, tall and lean, with long workman's hands which he didn't know where to put.

"Take a seat," Vaganov told him, pushing aside the sheets of paper.

"I've er ... like ... brought this testimonial," the man said. Pleased to have found something for his hands to do, he began fumbling anxiously in the inside pocket of his jacket for the something called a testimonial.

"What testimonial?"

"Against the wife. They've brought a charge against me, see... And I want to explain..."

"Are you Popov?"

"That's right."

"Well, what is it you want to explain? Why you started the fisticuffs? Why you beat up your wife and the man next door? What's a testimonial got to do with it?"

By now Popov had fished out the testimonial and was standing with it in the middle of the office. He must have been quite handsome once. He was still a fine-looking man with his slightly prominent cheekbones, predatory hooked nose, high, clear forehead and honest, unflinching eyes... But he was dishevelled and bleary-eyed, of course, he'd obviously had a drop to drink yesterday, shaved hurriedly this morning and barely splashed his face with cold water. Brrr.

"Let's have the testimonial then."

Popov handed him two pages from a school exercise book covered with writing, stepped back to the middle of the room and waited. Vaganov's eyes skimmed over the uneven lines... He had stopped finding the explanations and complaints written by uneducated people funny. They simply wrote as they thought, and the result was no sillier than some phoney piece of smooth talk, and more honest at least.

Vaganov read to the end.

"But it doesn't make any difference, Popov."

"Wotcha mean—doesn't make any difference?"

"It doesn't change anything. You say here that she's a so-and-so, a bad lot. Say I believe you. What difference does it make?"

"What difference?" cried Popov. "But she put me inside on purpose! For a whole fortnight. Put me inside and then had it off with that... I know she did. Kolka Korolyov told me all about it. And I knew anyway without him... She told me herself."

"Told you herself?"

"She did and all!" Popov exclaimed, confidingly. '"I'll put ye inside,' she says, 'and sleep here with Mishka.' "

"Come now... Did she really say that?"

"She did and all!" Popov exclaimed again. And sat down, now that the conversation had stopped being official and turned into a normal man-to-man talk. 'I'll put ye inside/ she says, 'and live with Mishka for a bit to spite ye.'"

"Did she really say 'to spite you'?"

"Nah, course not. But I know her! And I know that Mishka too—can't keep his hands off things what don't belong to him. I'll stake my life on

what I've written here. They were living together, the bastards. Started the very next day. Kolka Korolyov caught 'em red-handed."

"Well, I don't know..." The young Vaganov was really at a loss. The man seemed to be telling the bitter truth. "Then perhaps you'd better get divorced, eh?"

"Where would I go if we got divorced? She'd be sure to get the house. They'd give it to 'er. And what about the kiddies? They can't stand on their own feet yet. I feel sorry for them..."

"How many have you got?"

"Three. The youngest's only seven. I think the world of 'im. Couldn't stand it on me own. I'd go on the bottle."

"Listen to you!" said Vaganov angrily. "You sound like a paralytic. 'Couldn't stand it', 'go on the bottle'. Well, what's to be done, eh? Now imagine you haven't come to complain to an official. You've just come to a friend. I'm that friend, and I don't know what to advise you. If you can go on living with her after that, all well and good, but if you can't..."

"I can," said Popov firmly. "It don't matter that she's had a bit on the side. Only it mustn't happen again. I'm to blame myself. Always making a hullabaloo and never showing no affection. If I'd been a bit more affectionate, she might never have thought of doing it."

"Then go back to her!"

"Go back to her... They want to put me inside! And they will with all those witnesses they've got and them medical reports. It'll be three years in the cooler for me."

"Well, what is it you want then?"

"For them to drop the charges."

"And what's the testimonial for?"

"To have some papers against them too. Maybe they'll take a look at themselves in it and decide to drop the charges after all. They're no angels either! Just think, putting a feller inside, then having it off... What sort of woman would do a thing like that?"

"But you did give her a good hiding, didn't you?"

"There was more shouting and hollering, than good hiding..."

"But you had to go and use your fists, didn't you?"

Popov hung his head guiltily and stroked his knee with a broad brown palm.

"Couldn't stand it..."

"There he goes again. Jesus, what a helpless lot we are!" Vaganov got up from his desk and began pacing round the office. He felt angry with the man and sorry for him, too. Popov wasn't trying to curry favour. Even with his relatively little experience, Vaganov had learned to tell when people were deliberately trying to make you feel sorry for them. Sometimes they were very good at it. "If you'd just kept your temper and filed for a divorce, the court would have had to decide how to settle it; and they might have... But it's no use thinking about that now, is it?"

"No, it ain't," Popov agreed.

They said nothing for a while.

"What can we do?" Vaganov thought. "They'll put that silly idiot in prison. However the case is presented he's had it!"

"How did you get married?"

"How? Like everybody else. I came back from the war, and she was working in the village store... We got together like. I knew her before that too."

"Are you a local man?"

"Aye. Only none of my relatives are alive now. Mother and Father died before the war from stove fumes, both me elder brothers was killed in the war. I had two aunts and they're both gone too. Got some nephews in town, but I don't know where."

"Where's your wife now?"

Popov looked enquiringly at the investigator.

"Where does she work, you mean? Same place, in the village store."

"Is she there now?"

"Aye."

"Who did the testimonial for you?"

"Nobody. Did it meself. 'Can't have that/ says the lads. 'Must shoot a few papers back at 'em.' 'What can I shoot back?' I thinks. So I wrote that one..."

"Alright, leave it with me and I'll try to have a word with your wife. Off you go."

Popov got to his feet... He wanted to say or ask something else, but only looked at Vaganov, nodded his head obediently and went cautiously out of the room.

Left on his own, Vaganov stood for a long time, gazing at the door. Then he sat down and looked

at the white sheets of paper he had taken out for the letter.

"Well, Maya?" he asked. "What are we going to do?" He waited for a warm rush of tenderness to flood over him, but for some reason it did not come. "Dammit!" Vaganov said angrily. "I'll write this evening," he thought.

The cleaner at the public prosecutor's office went to fetch Popov's wife from the village store, which was nearby.

In the meantime Vaganov looked through the "papers" for'the case against Popov. Yes, they were obviously trying to get a prison sentence for him. And how brisk and business-like it all sounded. They'd hired someone who knew his onions. Vaganov pulled over Popov's "testimonial" and read it through again. A sad and comical human document. It wasn't really a testimonial at all, just a true account of what had happened. "So I has a shave and goes to see her. She's lying there like a boa constrictor on a feather bed. 'Go on/ I says, 'tell us what you got up to while I was away.' She sees things aren't too good and starts hollering. So I give her a clout to make her shut up. Then she ups and runs off—not to her family, mind you—off to that Mishka again. Then I lost me temper and couldn't stand it..."

Popov's wife, a good-looking woman of about forty, not at all shy, with the familiar manners of a shop assistant, showed at once that she knew the law: the law protected her.

"You know, Comrade Vaganov, I don't get a moment's peace. It's the drink makes him behave

like a hooligan. Now he's accusing me of going off with some Mishka or other! Uncouth duffer."

"Yes, yes..." Vaganov copied the brisk woman's familiar tone and led her on. "It's disgraceful. He must know the law's very strict about that these days. Perhaps he's forgotten."

"He's forgotten everything! Never mind, he'll soon remember again. They'll give him three years, then he'll have time to remember."

"But what about the children ... how'll they manage without their father?"

"Oh, they're big now. Anyway a father like that's no good to anyone."

"Has he always been like that?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, behaving like a hooligan and fighting."

"No, he used to be much quieter when he drank. Then he started being jealous of Mishka. Last year that was. And the things he threatens to do! 'I'll cut both your throats!' he says."

"I see. And who is this Mishka?"

"Oh, goodness, he's just a neighbour. They moved here last year... He's a driver for the village store."

"Is he a bachelor?"

"Well, they both moved here, but they haven't sold their old house, see. His wife don't think much of this place, but Mishka likes it here. He's crazy about fishing, and that's one thing you can do here. So they're living in the two places. With a garden there and another one here. So she keeps travelling to and fro, his wife, looking after the two, greedy thing."

"I see..." Vaganov was now quite sure Popov was right. His wife was being unfaithful to him. In an insolent, shameless way. "He says here that you told him outright: 'I'll put you in the clink and live here with Mishka.'" There was nothing about that in the "testimonial", but Vaganov remembered what Popov had said and pretended to have read it there. "Is that true?"

"He wrote that, did he?!" cried the woman loudly. "The cheek of it! Well, I never!" She even laughed. "Just think of that!"

"Is it true?"

"No, it is not!"

"She's sure of herself alright, the hussy," Vaganov thought angrily. "I won't give him up to you as easily as that!"

"So you want him locked up?"

"Yes, locked up, Georgy Konstantinovich. It's the only way. Let him do a stretch."

"Don't you feel sorry?" Vaganov couldn't help asking.

Popov's wife stiffened. She gave the young investigator an enquiring look, then smiled ingratiatingly.

"What for?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Vaganov replied evasively. "You can go now." He gave the woman a hard stare.

The woman said "Uh-ha", got up, walked over to the door, then turned round worriedly... Vaganov went on staring at her.

"I forgot to ask why you had children so late?"

The woman was really flustered now. Not by the question, but because the investigator had

changed before her eyes: his tone and expression... In her confusion she walked up to the desk again and sat down on the chair which she had just left.

"I just didn't get pregnant," she said. "That was all. And then I did get pregnant. So what?"

"I see, you can go now," Vaganov said again. He put his hand on the "papers". "Everything..." he stressed the word, "will be fully investigated. The trial will be a very strict one: and whoever is guilty will be brought to justice. Goodbye."

The woman walked over to the door... Her departure was less confident than her arrival.

"Yes," the investigator remembered. "And who's this..." he pretended to be searching in Popov's paper for the name of the witness, although that name was not mentioned there either. "Who's this Korolyov?"

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the woman at the door. "Kolka Korolyov? He goes boozing with my old man, no one's going to believe a word he says!" She was confused now. You could tell it from her voice.

"Is he a registered alcoholic then? This Korolyov?"

The woman was about to walk back to the desk again and tell him all about Korolyov. She obviously realised that this was the weakest point in her offensive.

"Who registers them here. Comrade Vaganov! He's just a friend of my old man's. They fought together in the war..."

"Very well, you can go now. We'll get to the bottom of it all."

His gaze alighted on the white sheets of paper waiting for him. And looking at them, his thoughts began to wander. Maya... A remote, spring-like, marvellous name. At last he could start writing some beautiful, heartfelt words, one by one, lots of them! All the morning he had been itching to sit down and write that letter. And he would let these beautiful, feathered words fly like winged arrows from a bow—and shoot them one by one into the trim figure of faraway Maya. He would shoot so many that Maya would cry out with inevitable love... He would pierce her wooden heart, Vaganov thought, and strike the part of her that was alive and capable of loving just for love's sake, without being on the make. Then suddenly he thought to himself clearly and simply: "But can she do that? Is she capable of loving like that?" And having asked himself this calm and sober question, he would have to give the equally calm and sober reply: probably not. It was a question of upbringing, the sort of life she was used to... She just couldn't, and that was that. Just take that affair with the talented physicist... But, on the other hand, who could say! To be objective [9] you'd have to know more about the circumstances—about the physicist, and how it began and how it ended. "Steady on, old chap," Vaganov thought angrily, "don't get carried away. What's happened? You've just witnessed another sad story of someone's clumsy life... So what? There have been plenty before and there'll be plenty more to come! Are you going to measure yourself against each of them? Whatever for? It's sheer nonsense! Why should an uneducated man,

aware of nothing but his own defencelessness, and his cheeky, shameless wife who, unlike her husband, is aware of being fully protected, why should they of all people, with their lack of common sense, suggest how he should solve this of all things, in his by no means simple and by no means mediocre, as he liked to think, life?" But it was a fact that after the Popovs' story Vaganov had lost all desire to "shoot" at faraway Maya. The clarity and excitement of the morning had clouded over. Everything inside him had gone anxious and taut, as if someone had thrown a stone through the window... "I'll write this evening," Vaganov decided. "It's silly of me, probably because I'm so young, to mix work with my private life. I must keep them separate. I mustn't complicate things."

That evening Vaganov shut himself away in his room, turned off the radio and sat down at the table to write. But in his mind's eye he kept seeing the guilty Popov and his chirpy wife. Like an obsession, like the onset of madness... Vaganov tried calling himself some unflattering names and reasoning with himself calmly and logically... But it didn't help. There they were, standing in front of him. It was not even they themselves, although they were what Vaganov remembered all the time, but what they had told him, that kept confusing his thoughts and feelings. "Very well, then," Vaganov said angrily to himself at last. "If you're a coward, just say so —straight out. This is what's happened: that

Popov woman has in some incomprehensible way reinforced your secret suspicion that Maya is just as selfish and out for what she can get, only the other woman's not much good at it, whereas she's smarter and far more successful. But that makes it even worse, even more painful. That's the danger you sensed here. So why not just say straight out: They're all the same!' and put an end to it without even starting to write the letter. And be a coward and go on persuading yourself. It's safer like that. You wretched pettifogger!"

Vaganov sat motionless at the table for a long time... He really was suffering. He stretched out for a sheet of paper again, then paused once more... No, he couldn't bring himself to write it. Something inside him was holding him back. Telling him that he might be doing something stupid. He had a cowardly feeling, probably inborn: what if it all went wrong! That's what he was afraid of, to be quite honest and objective. "You plebeian and son of a plebeian! Go on, make a mistake, do something silly... Nothing venture, nothing gain. Don't toss caution to the winds, of course, and get all sorts of illusions, but it's mean and petty to go weighing everything up like that. You'll never get anything if you're so tight-fisted! Come on, let's write that letter. We won't write a great poem or shoot arrows at Maya from afar. We'll just tell her straight: you'll get as good as you give, sweetheart. Tell her that."

...Around four o'clock in the morning Vaganov finished a long letter. It was already light outside. The cool air of the early June morning wafted through the open window. Vaganov leaned

against the window frame and lit a cigarette. The letter had worn him out. He had started it about twelve times, torn it up, fretted and cursed, and now he was very tired. So tired that he couldn't bring himself to read it through. It wasn't so much that he didn't want to, but more that he was afraid. The letter didn't make anything clear, nor was it particularly clever. Vaganov had been aware of that all the time he was writing it. All the time he had felt he was trying to show off rather than... He dragged nervily on his cigarette several times, sat down at the table and began to read the letter.

"Maya! Your letter came as such a shock that I haven't been able to think of anything else since I got it the day before yesterday. I keep asking myself what it means. And can't find an answer. So now I am asking you: what does it mean, Maya? Of course you can come and stay with me for a week. But that's what I'm asking about: what does it mean? You know how I used to feel about you... And my poor heart tells me that I still feel just the same as before: I love you. And that is what gives me the right to ask and say what I think about you. And about myself. What does it mean, Maya? Is it running away from oneself? Alright then, come and stay here. But where will I be able to run away from myself? I have nowhere. And I will want to run away, I know that. So that's why I ask you once more (like in a cross-examination): what does it mean, Maya? Write me another letter, please, a short one, and answer this question: what does it mean, Maya?" That was how Vaganov began his long letter... He

put it aside and cupped his chin in his hands. He even felt his heart begin to ache from his own stupidity and helplessness. "Just like a parrot! What does it mean, Maya? What does it mean, Maya? Ugh! You worm!" This indecisiveness really was like a terrible misfortune. It was the first time in his life that Vaganov had been in such a fix. "Oh, God, what shall I do? What shall I do?" Vaganov tried to think of someone he could go to for advice—he was even ready to do that—but he couldn't think of a soul. There was no one here whom he could trust and tell his troubles to without feeling ashamed. The only person he could think of was Popov, the frank, honest eyes, the intelligent forehead... So what? "So what, Maya?" he said again with angry sarcasm. "It's nothing, Maya. It's just that I'm a creep, Maya."

He screwed the letter into a tight ball and threw it out of the window into the garden. Then he lay down on the bed and closed his eyes tightly, like he had as a child when he wanted something unpleasant to be over and forgotten as soon as possible.

That morning as he walked to work Vaganov felt terribly tired. For some reason the same tune kept going round and round in his empty head: "I'm playing my accordion for passers-by to hear..." He'd decided not to write a letter for a bit. Not until things were a bit clearer, not until he had decided whether he really was capable of achieving anything or had simply imagined himself to be clever and competent, as other

people had encouraged him, silly idiot, to think. He must find that out first and not deceive himself, not have any illusions about himself. Only one thing was clear so far: that he loved Maya and was afraid of getting involved with her. Afraid of responsibility and losing his freedom, afraid that he would not be strong and reliable beside her, and that it would mean the end of his career. "Let's see how you wriggle out of that, you manly creature," he thought about him with genuine anger. "Let's wait and see."

He began his working day by sending someone to fetch Popov.

Popov arrived quickly, peering cautiously round the door as before.

"Come in!" Vaganov got up from his desk, shook Popov's hand, sat him down on a chair, then sat down beside him.

"What's your first name?"

"Pavel."

"How are things? At home, I mean?"

Popov said nothing. He looked at the investigator with his grey eyes. There was something remarkable about those eyes of his; was it that they were excessively trusting or wise? They were as clear as a child's, yet they had seen death, and grief, and the man himself had suffered a great deal... Perhaps this was where the strength of the human race lay, in this patience and submission? And perhaps everything else was just loutish, greedy and cruel?

"Not so bad... Why?" Popov asked.

"Spoken to the wife?"

"We ain't been on speakin' terms for a week."

"Noticed anything different about her?"

"I'll say." Popov grinned. "Yesterday evenin' she gives me this funny look and says: 'Been to see the investigator, have you?' 'Aye! says I. Think you're the only one what can go runnin'to him?' "

"What did she say to that?"

"Nowt. Just kept quiet. And I kept quiet too."

"They'll drop the charges," said Vaganov. "I'll ask to see her once again, maybe even more than once... I think they'll drop them."

"And a good thing too," said Popov simply. "I don't want a spell in clink. What the hell! I getting on in years..."

"Pavel," Vaganov began reflectively to broach the subject that was weighing on his mind. "I want to ask your advice..." Listening to himself, Vaganov wondered whether he shouldn't be ashamed of himself, asking this elderly man for advice like some strip of a boy. Wasn't he being ridiculous? No, he wasn't ashamed or ridiculous. What was ridiculous about it? "I've got this woman, Pavel... no, I don't mean like that. There's this woman, see, and I love her. She was married, but now she's got divorced and she's hinting..." At this point Vaganov felt slightly embarrassed, because he'd got off to such a clumsy start. "Well, anyway, I love this woman, but I'm afraid of getting involved with her."

"Why'sthat?"asked Popov.

"Well, I'm afraid she's the same ... as your wife. I'm afraid it would be the end of me. I'd have to work just for her: make sure life was interesting

and gay for her, not boring... And everything I'd planned to do would go by the board. I'd just have to please her all the time."

"I wouldn't say that," said Popov doubtfully. "Ye just have to live side by side, sharin' everything like, the good times and the bad..."

"Oh, yes, I know what you have to do. I know all that."

"Well, what's the matter then?"

Vaganov lost all desire to continue the conversation. He had begun to feel annoyed with someone.

"I know what you have to do. How people should live. Everyone knows that. But what should I do if I know I love her and yet I know she'll ... never be a real friend to me? Is your wife a friend to you?"

"My wife!"

"Yes, your wife. Everyone's the same basically. We all want to be happy. Haven't you ever needed a friend?"

"All I can say is this, Comrade Vaganov," Popov had got the idea at last. "Ye can't expect nowt from that lot, them womenfolk. They'll only let you down. I've thought about it too. About why folk can't live together properly. Every family's got summat wrong with it. Summat that's upsettin' the apple cart. Why is that? 'Cos ye can't expect anything better from them womenfolk... That's the way they're made."

"Then why on earth do we marry them?" exclaimed Vaganov, taken aback by such categorical philosophy.

"Ah, that's a different matter." Popov spoke easily and confidently. As if he really had given it some thought. "A man needs a family, whether he likes it or not. Without a family, he's not worth a brass farthing. Why do we love our kiddies so much, eh? 'Cos they give us the strength to put up with the tantrums of them womenfolk."

"But there must be some normal families!"

"Show me one. It's all sham. They don't like washin' their dirty linen in public. But they fight hammer and tongs when no one's lookin'."

"Well, I never!" Vaganov was getting more and more surprised. "This is a sad state of affairs. What's a man to do then?"

"Just stick it out and hope for the best. And don't kid yourself. A wife as a friend? That's a laugh. Be thankful that they have kiddies at least... And don't hold it against them for being made like that. What's the point?" Popov was quietly confident of his truth. Now that he realised Vaganov wanted this truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, he let him have it. He was looking at the young man calmly, even quizzically, not in the least nervous.

"I see, I see," Vaganov said. "No, Popov, you're only saying that because you're upset, unhappy. It's not really like that..."

Popov shrugged his shoulders.

"Ye asked me what I thought, so I told ye."

"Yes, that's right. I'm not arguing. You could argue about this till kingdom come, but..."

"Of course. Everyone lives like that, right from the start. Suppose someone had told me: 'Don't get married, Pavel, lad, or ye'll regret it.' What

would I have done? Sent him to the devil and done what I liked. That's what all folk do."

"Yes, yes," Vaganov agreed with him. "That's true. Alright, then." He got up. Popov got up too. "Goodbye, Pavel. I think they'll drop the charges. Only mind you don't..."

"Not on yer life, Comrade Vaganov!" Popov assured him. "I'll never do it again, I promise. It was daft... What can ye knock out of them, eh? Let them feel ashamed of themselves. Like I'm ashamed of makin' all this fuss... Coin' around tellin' tales... Who wouldn't be ashamed of that?"

"Well, goodbye then."

"Goodbye."

No sooner had the door closed behind Popov, than Vaganov sat down at his desk to write. While he was talking to Popov, he had decided to send Maya a telegram saying: "Come. No luxury suites. *Omnia mea mecum porto.* Will meet. Georgy."

He wrote it down... Read it through. And whistled the same tune, "I'm playing my accordion", at the clever wording. Then he tore the piece of paper neatly, picked up the pieces, then walked over and dropped them into the waste-paper basket. A blank sense of relief flooded over him. All the anger and irritation was washed away. But he couldn't work today. So he went over to the desk and wrote in big letters on a sheet of paper:

"Not feeling well. Have gone home."

He wasn't up to seeing anyone in the office or talking to them.

On the way home he sang quietly to himself:

I'm playing my accordion
For passers-by to hear.
What a shame a birthday comes
But o-o-once a ye-e-ear.

It was a marvellous day, not too hot, but warm and fragrant. There was no dust yet, the summer was just beginning to mature. Its young green vigour was driving the sap of life out of the earth; everything was in bloom, or just beginning to bloom or just finishing, and where the blossoms had faded were little swelling balls which would soon be fruit. A superb, heavenly time! It was still too early to regret that the days were growing shorter. Those days still lay ahead.

Vaganov turned off to the post-office. He went in, took a telegram form from the counter, sat down at the edge of the battered, ink-stained table and wrote Maya's address... His pen hovered for a moment over the space for the text... Then he wrote one word: "Come."

And sat there staring at this daunting word. He looked at it hard for a long time. Then crumpled up the form and threw it into the waste-paper basket.

"Changed your mind?" asked the woman at the counter.

"Can't remember the address," Vaganov lied. He went outside and set off resolutely in the direction of home.

"Fancy me learning to lie like that!" he thought about himself impersonally, as if it were someone else. "Didn't bat an eyelid."

No scent of hay wafted from the meadows. Haymaking had not yet begun.

A little girl who was called Vera was seriously ill. Her father, Fyodor Kuzmich, who was no longer a young man, was so upset that he could not sleep at night. She was a late child, who would be his last, and he loved the little girl to distraction. She was such a playful little thing, always playing with her father, never out of his arms when he was at home, always tousling his hair and wanting to balance her father's spectacles on her little button of a nose... And now she had fallen ill. When they saw how very sad he was, Fyodor Kuzmich's friends-he had influential friends—sent all kinds of doctors to his house... But even the district pediatrician could see what the matter was—pneumonia, and the only treatment was injections. And the little scrap of a girl was given injection after injection. When the nurse came, Fyodor Kuzmich would leave the flat and go out on to the landing, or even go two floors down the stairs and wait it out. He smoked. Then he would come back when the little girl had stopped crying and was lying there, weak and feverish... Looking at him. Fyodor felt a stone weight on his heart. He would have cried, if he could, if the tears would only come. But they wouldn't come, they were stuck somewhere in his throat. In his helplessness and grief he hurt the feelings of his wife, the little girl's mother, terribly: he reproached her for not taking proper care of her child. "You were more interested in your fancy clothes than in the child," he said to her in the kitchen, as if he was dropping heavy

boulders on to the table. "Everybody's in a hurry to stock up for themselves." His wife burst into tears... And now, even though they might not argue—this was no time for arguing—they did not seek help or comfort from each other, each of them suffered in solitude.

The doctor came every day. And then he said that the time had come, when... Well, in a word, all of the girl's small store of energy had been summoned up to fight the illness, and if there was just some way of helping her, of somehow raising her spirits and directing her will towards some bright hope ahead, she would recover more quickly. No, of course she would recover anyway, but it would be still better if she really, really wanted, even unconsciously, to get better.

Fyodor Kuzmich squatted down in front of his daughter's little bed.

"My little love, what would you like most of all?.. Just think, now. Whatever it is, I'll do it. And if I can't, I'll ask a magician, I know a magician who can do anything. Do you want me to decorate a New Year's tree for you? Do you remember the marvellous New Year's tree we had? With the little lights!.."

The girl's little hand shifted on the blanket, she turned her cupped little palm upwards—that was what she did when she wanted to make a logical objection to something.

"New Year's trees are for winter."

"Yes, of course they are," her father hastily nodded his head with its greying hair. "I forgot. Do you want to go to watch some cartoon films when you're better? Lots and lots of them!.."

"I mustn't watch too many," said clever little Verochka. "Daddy," she suddenly raised herself slightly from the pillow. "Uncle Igo' tells a faiwy stowy about a little bunny... Ooh, it's a lovewy stowy!.."

"Yes, tell me." Fyodor Kuzmich was agitated and overjoyed. "What was the story Uncle Yegor told you about the bunny?"

Little Vera nodded her head, and her eyes gleamed brightly.

" 'Bout a little bunny..."

"Would you like to hear it?"

" 'Bout how he wen' fow a bawoon ride..."

"A balloon ride? What kind of balloons were they?"

"Just bawoons!.. Will Uncle Igo' come?"

"Uncle Yegor? No, Uncle Yegor lives a long way away, in a different town... Let's see whether we can remember what kind of balloons the bunny went for a ride on. Did he fly, or just ride along?"

"No, no!" Tears sprang to little Vera's eyes. "Know what it was like?.. When the wind blows you fly way up high! I want Uncle Igo' to come."

"Uncle Yegor lives a long way away, my love. He has to come on the train... On the choo-choo train! Or fly in an aeroplane..."

"You tell the stowy."

"About the bunny? If you just give me a little clue, perhaps I'll remember about his balloon ride. Did he blow up the balloons and then fly away?"

The little girl knitted her brows in extreme annoyance, frowned and turned away to face the

wall. Her father saw a large tear well up out of the corner of her eye, roll across the bridge of her nose like a clear dew-drop, and fall onto the pillow.

"My darling," her father implored her. "I'll find out, don't cry. Just a moment... Mummy probably remembers what kind of balloons he went for a ride on. Just a moment, my pet... Alright? I'll tell you the story in a moment."

Fyodor Kuzmich almost ran into the kitchen to his wife. She was startled to see him come running in like that.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, but... Do you remember the story about the bunny going for a balloon ride?"

"A balloon ride?" His wife was puzzled. "What bunny?"

Fyodor Kuzmich lost his temper again.

"A French bunny with horns on its head!.. A bunny! It's a fairy-story Yegor told her. Didn't you hear it?"

His wife was upset and burst into tears. Fyodor Kuzmich took a grip on himself, put his arms round his wife and wiped away her tears with his hand.

"There, there..."

"I sit here feeling like a criminal!..." said his wife. "I hear nothing but reproaches. Do you think you're the only one suffering?"

"I know, I know," said Fyodor. "Forgive me, I didn't mean it... I lost my head... I just don't know what to do."

"What's this story about?"

"About some bunny, and how he went for a balloon ride. Yegor told her it... Ah!" Fyodor suddenly had an idea. "I'll phone Yegor right away! I'll go and phone from the post office."

"Why from the post office? You can phone from here."

"From a private phone ... by the time they take the order from a private phone... I'll go straight down now."

And Fyodor Kuzmich went to the post office. And as he walked along a quite different idea came into his head-he would ask Yegor to come. He would come and tell her heaps of stories, he was a great hand at such things. He obviously must have made up this story with the hare. And he could make up as many more as you like... Today was Thursday, tomorrow was the last working-day of the week, he could get one day off, and he could fly back on Sunday evening. It was just over two hours by plane... And Fyodor also thought what a wonderful surprise it would be for his little girl when "Uncle Igo'" himself arrived—she loved him and his stories, she listened to them with rapt attention.

Fyodor Kuzmich didn't get through to his brother straightaway, but eventually he managed it. Fortunately, Yegor was there—he had come home for lunch. There was no need for long, wordy explanations to Yegor's wife about his daughter being ill ... and all the rest.

"Yegor!" Fyodor shouted into the receiver. "I'll put you on the plane on Sunday and you'll fly back. Everything will be fine! If you want I can write to your boss afterwards!.."

"No need!" Yegor shouted back down the line. "That's not the problem! We're all set to go off to the dacha..."

"Look, Yegor, for goodness' sake, put off the dacha! Please! This is the moment of crisis, don't you see? She burst into tears just now..."

"I'd be happy to, myself... Can you hear me?"

"Yes, yes."

"I'd be happy to, but..." Yegor stopped speaking, as though he were embarrassed about something.

"Yegor! Yegor!" shouted Fyodor.

"Wait," answered Yegor, "my wife and I are just discussing it..."

"A-ah!" thought Fyodor. "His wife's put her spoke in."

"Yegor! Yegor!" he called again. "Give the phone to your wife, I'll have a word with her."

"Hello, Fyodor Kuzmich!" The distant voice was polite. "Did I hear your daughter is ill?"

"She is, Valentina..." Fyodor had suddenly forgotten what her patronymic was. He knew it, but he had forgotten. And he changed his tone in mid-sentence. "Valya, please let your husband come, just for two days! Only two days! I'd find some way to thank you, Valya, I..." In his agitation Fyodor could not immediately think what to promise. "I'll help you out some time too!"

"There's no need, I don't mind... We were just about to go to the dacha. You know, it was neglected all winter, and we wanted to..."

"Valya, love, please! It would take a long time to explain now, but it's really important. Really important. Valya!.."

"Yes, Fyodor. It's me," answered Yegor. "Alright. Do you hear me? Alright, I say, I'll fly out today."

"Oh, Yegor..." Fyodor said nothing for a minute. "Thank you. I'll be waiting."

When Yegor put down the receiver, he had the following conversation with his wife.

"My God!" said his wife Valya. "Just drop everything and go flying off to tell some little girl fairy-stories..."

"The child is ill..."

"Children are always ill! No child ever grew up without being ill."

Yegor himself found the idea a bit crazy—to fly almost fifteen hundred kilometres ... to tell fairy stories. But he remembered how pitiful his brother's voice had sounded, he could hear the tears in his voice—no, he obviously had to go. Perhaps more for Fyodor's sake than for the girl's.

"The first trip we were going to make," nagged his wife. "The Bolshakovs have already been out, and they say their roof has been leaking. And our roof is worse than theirs..."

"Then why didn't you tell him that?" fumed Yegor. "Why didn't you tell him? After I've already promised him, you start getting uppity."

"Alright, no need to shout, don't be so soft! What about me, don't I have any right to voice my own opinion?"

"But why didn't you tell it to him? You should have told him. And all you did was express your sympathies: 'I hear your daughter is ill?'" Yegor was not a malicious man, but he could mimic anyone so well that they were hurt and offended by his skill. That was how Yegor defended himself in life. That was probably why he was such a brilliant story-teller—he mimicked all the animals, the good ones and the bad ones, and he did a particularly funny imitation of the witch Baba-Yaga.

"Go, then. Go!" His wife gestured impatiently. "Go and humour them, if you've nothing better to do. Run at their beck and call!.."

"They've helped you in their time!" Yegor looked at his wife reproachfully. "Have you forgotten that?"

His wife Valya went into the other room, slamming the door behind her. No, she hadn't forgotten! Fyodor Kuzmich had got her daughter a place in college. How could you forget that? But she was very upset, and she couldn't help showing it.

Yegor was upset too. Somehow, a long time ago, things between his wife and himself had been imperceptibly arranged so that his wife's interests were the most important in the house. Yegor had resigned himself to this, because he did not know how to get hold of things they wanted, or arrange the travel-warrants for a holiday, or talk things out with the teachers in school... he only knew how to work. But what of that? Horses know how to work. Work is not much use on its own, Yegor had also realised that

a long time ago and so he had resigned himself to things. Sometimes, it is true, he would rebel, but only weakly and indecisively: he would suddenly seethe with anger and his eyes would flash, and he would swear roundly to himself, and that was all. It was really better not to rebel or protest at all; protests only inflame the lust for power in strong characters.

Yegor lingered angrily in the room for a little while longer, took forty roubles from the sideboard and went out. "At least I don't have to take a suitcase... Should I pick up some gifts? But then, since it's all such a big rush what's the point of any gifts. As long as I go myself," thought Yegor. He suddenly felt very sorry for little Vera. At first, in all the haste, he hadn't realised just how necessary this trip was, how important it was, but now that he had set off, he understood it all: it was stupid of him even to have hesitated. But what if... But Yegor drove the thought out of his mind before he even finished it. He rang the shop foreman from a public phone (Yegor was a first-class cabinet-maker, and he was highly thought of at work), and the foreman let him go without a moment's hesitation: he knew that Yegor would catch up on the two working days, and to spare.

At the airport ticket office they told Yegor that there were no tickets to N.

"Maybe you can give me one somehow..." he asked timidly.

"What does that mean, 'give you one somehow'? There are no tickets left," the stern voice at the little window repeated.

Yegor stood there for a while, then looked at the woman behind the glass... And he stooped down to talk to her again:

"I really need a ticket, miss... Come on, please. It's ... there's a child..."

"Citizen, I've already told you, there are no tickets left. Can't you understand simple Russian. Give him one somehow..."

"I understand, I understand..." Yegor felt the urge to mimic the woman at the window, he could easily have done it... "Ah!" he suddenly remembered. "That man I did the shelving for ... he said, if ever you need anything, come to me." Fortunately Yegor had written down the powerful comrade's telephone number. He looked in his note-book, and there it was!

He spent a long time going into tedious detail about his little niece, and his brother, and the fairy-stories...

"Where do you need a ticket for?" asked the powerful comrade, his patience exhausted.

"To N."

"You should have said so straightaway. Today? One ticket?"

"One. For today. I'm already here ... do you understand? I'm here at the airport, and they say there are no tickets. And I can't see how there can't be at least one ticket. I don't see how that could possibly..."

"Ring back in about ten minutes," the confident bass interrupted him once again.

Yegor realised that he would be on today's flight.

He walked around the airport for a while, until about fifteen minutes had passed, and then phoned.

"Go and pick up your ticket at desk number three," said the bass.

"Thank you very much!" Yegor blurted out gratefully. "I was beginning to get worried... My brother was almost in tears. This is his second marriage, you know, the child is his last one, that's why he's taking it so hard. I love the little girl too, she's such a clever thing, she always wants to be told stories..."

"Well, goodbye," said the voice at the other end of the line. "Safe journey."

"Goodbye," said Yegor.

Desk number three was not the one he had tried. If it had been that one, Yegor would have said to that woman at the window ... he would have said: "So you managed to find a ticket after all? Well done... Now how does that happen, my dear lady? You sit there looking so stern and just. 'I told you, there are no tickets left!' And it just takes one phone call to discover that there is a ticket left. That's the way you should tell people. 'There are no tickets-for you!' And the expression on your face, as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth! When you're just a nobody with a peaked cap." Well, perhaps he wouldn't have been that sarcastic. Perhaps he wouldn't have said anything at all: she really was a nobody, so what was the point of saying anything?

...Yegor arrived in N before dawn, at about five o'clock. And at six he was already at his brother's house.

He rang the bell... The door was opened by his brother's wife, Nadezhda Semyonovna.

"0-oh!" she exclaimed in astonishment. "Why are you here so early?"

"I had a bit of luck with the ticket," Yegor said happily. "I got straight on to the flight... How's little Vera?"

"Better. She's still asleep. Please don't make any noise."

"Of course!" Yegor exclaimed in a soft voice. "Is Fyodor in?"

"Yes, he is."

"Well, let's sit in the kitchen for a while... He'll find us there."

Fyodor came into the kitchen in his dressing-gown and slippers. Yegor was amused, he looked so sleepy, large and clumsy in his dressing-gown.

"You look just like the priest in it," he greeted him.

His brother Fyodor twisted his lips into a wry smile.

"How was the flight?"

"Fine!"

"And what about your wife? Did she mind, then?"

"Well, we were going to go to the dacha... But never mind her!"

"What's this, does she wear the trousers in your house?"

"We-ell... There's no point in talking about that. How's Vera?"

"The crisis has passed. She'll recover. I was really afraid there for a minute..."

"I realised that."

"What will you have? Tea? Coffee? Or maybe something to warm you after the journey?" Fyodor began to poke about in the cupboards, still in his funny outfit. "We'll find something or other... There, cognac! Will you have some?"

"Okay." Yegor observed his elder brother with interest. Fyodor had been at Yegor's place a couple of times, not exactly visiting, just in passing: he had impressed everyone with his business-like attitude, the will-power and energy that burst out of him. "Yes," they had thought in the provinces, "here's a bird that could give you a nasty peck."

"Okay, brother, pour away. You look kind of funny." Yegor could not help saying it. "A normal human being ... no big wheel after all."

"What?" said Fyodor resentfully. "What's so funny? Have you never seen a dressing-gown before? It's pretty comfortable, you know."

"It's not the dressing-gown... Well, cheers, here's to our meeting. And to Vera's swift recovery."

The brothers drank from small, but somehow solid, heavy little glasses... They said nothing for a while.

"How's life?" Fyodor asked.

"Well..." Yegor reached over to the ash-tray and the sleeve of his jacket knocked over the tall, slim liqueur-glass. Its thin edge gave a sharp squeak as it struck the smooth table-top, and it shattered. "Oh, God!" Yegor exclaimed in fright. And he glanced at his brother, but his brother chuckled, carefully gathered up the glass and its

broken rim with his fingers, and threw them into the rubbish basket.

"That fear must be born into people," said Fyodor. "You know, nobody ever scolded Vera for breaking crockery, but she dropped a saucer once and frightened herself to death!.. I dashed over to calm her down, and tell her it was nothing to be frightened about. If she drops her doll it means nothing to her, but a cup or a plate is a different matter... There must be some kind of law here, eh?"

"Probably. It was an expensive glass, damn it," Yegor said regretfully. "Cut glass."

"Forget it!" said Fyodor, bored with the matter. "Cut glass... It's still just a thing, and it's there to be used. Its time had come, that's all there is to it."

The brothers were perhaps vaguely aware that they really had nothing to talk about. The last trip had been different: Yegor's daughter, Nina, had been taking her college entrance exams, and she had immediately begun to do badly, so that Fyodor had to intervene... All their conversations had circled around examinations and the college. Yegor was living at Fyodor's house, and he was very worried about his daughter, but he had not interfered with many suggestions of his own, he had unloaded all his hopes on to his brother and simply waited fearfully for the end of these cursed entrance exams. It was then that he had made friends with little Vera and invented all sorts of stories for her in the evenings. Everything had somehow been simpler then.

"How's Nina?" asked Fyodor, also remembering Yegor's daughter; perhaps he was also thinking that when Nina was trying for a place in the college, they had been rushed off their feet, but then conversations had just happened of their own accord, there had been no need to think about what to say.

"She's working in a library. I tell her she should take a rest and go off swimming or something, there'll be plenty of time for work! But she won't have it, she'd much rather be working. Says it will be practical experience."

"Let her work then, it's good for her. There'll be plenty of time for swimming too. First of all she has to take the major target and graduate."

"But it's tiring to study all the time! It must be, surely!"

"Studying's nothing to be afraid of!" said Fyodor in a forceful, didactic tone. "What kind of nonsense is that, to be afraid of studying. As if our people weren't in bad enough need of study. I still remember what Granny Fyokla used to say: 'Fedya, don't read all of the book, you'll go balmy!' There's insight for you! And why is it like that? Where the devil do we get this panic and fear of books? Book learning is exactly what we're short of... And then they tell you: don't read it all, or you'll go crazy."

"Well, there have been cases..."

"What, from books?"

"From books! The Gilevs' lad, now, Vitka, he overdid his reading. Went quietly crazy."

"What makes you think the books caused it?"

.

"He read day and night..."

"What of it?"

"What do you mean? He overdid it."

Fyodor snorted in annoyance, but before he spoke he took out another liqueur-glass and splashed brandy into it. And he splashed some into his own glass too.

"Cheers. So you think reading drives you crazy... Have you read many books in your life?"

"You can't take me as an example."

"Then who should I take? Take me now: I've read a mountain of books, I'm still alive and well, and I feel I still haven't read enough, I should read three times as much."

"Why should you read any more?" Yegor was astonished. "What else do you need? You've got plenty of everything!.."

"I'm short of knowledge!" Fyodor said angrily. "That's what. The younger generation's putting us under pressure. And they really put it on! We can hold out for just so long, and then—move over, please, it's time to give someone else a turn. You can't argue with life, brother."

"I don't know..." said Yegor. "No one's putting me under any pressure."

"Of course not! Your job, don't be offended, please, but anyone could do your job. Well, not anyone, but every second person. There are more difficult things..."

"Then you should give someone else a turn," said Yegor, also growing angry for some reason, probably at the insult to his profession. "There's too many blockheads at the top who can do nothing but sit there and yell."

"Not so fast," Fyodor drawled in a trembling voice. "You're too smart, the lot of you! There are other factors involved, like—experience. Intellectual seniority. They see the dachas! They see the cars! But they don't see the way we toss and turn at night from... You went swimming on Saturday, and I have to sit in my office, waiting for a call: he might ring, or he might not. And if he rings, what will he say? It's the easiest thing in the world to count the money in someone else's pocket. It's not so easy to earn it..."

"I'm not counting your money. What do you mean?"

"I'm not talking about you. But there are some people who do. Never invented as much as a chamber-pot, but full of comments and complaints. When you're dry behind the ears, then I'll listen to your complaints. Whipper-snappers. Do they think someone handed me all this on a plate?" Fyodor shook his head vaguely, it was not clear whether he meant the large, richly-appointed flat, or was pointing further afield, to the dacha and the car in its garage, or whether he was just indicating the wardrobe in which hung his black suit with all his decorations. "I can look God himself straight in the face and say it was all earned by hard work. So there. I've never been afraid of work myself, and I won't let anyone else..." Fyodor Maximov closed his huge fist around the liqueur-glass, and it was completely hidden from sight. No, Fyodor Kuzmich was still strong, he was in no hurry to move over and let someone else take his place. "If you go stirring things up, you have to see

them through to the end." Fyodor was probably just slightly drunk and was taking advantage of his brother's presence to speak his mind on a sore point—his brother should understand. "You get so wound up during the day, do so much yelling, as you call it,—unfortunately you can't get anything done without it—and at night you lie there thinking, 'Devil take the bloody lot of them! It's my country that I have to answer to: is my life what it should be or not?' "

"Who says your life's not what it should be?" Yegor sympathised. "Quite the opposite. I'm always glad for you, I always think, 'Well done, Fyodor, at least one of the family has really made something of himself.' "

"It's not a question of 'making something of yourself. I'm not so very important... I simply do my job, and ! try to do it well. But no!.." Fyodor struck the table with the edge of his palm without even realising that he was making a noise. "There are always some people who won't leave anyone in peace... They'll hint that someone from a peasant background is not intellectually competent to grasp the broad vista of our country's development, that a peasant will always think in terms of his own allotment and his ploughland... That's the way they think, Yegor!" Fyodor looked at his brother, attempting to convey with his gaze all the bitter stupidity of such reasoning. "That's the sort of thing I have to defend myself against. And who built up the country to last throughout the ages, if not the peasant?"

"Are you in trouble, or something?" Yegor asked.

"Trouble..." Fyodor appeared to be listening closely to the word itself. He spoke it once again, in a thoughtful voice: "Trouble." And suddenly he asked himself, "Was there ever a time without trouble?" And he hastily answered his own question. "Of course there were good times. No, never mind. I'm just ... tired these last few days, my nerves are at breaking-point. Of course I'm in trouble, that's all part of being alive. But never mind! Everything's fine."

And Yegor felt sorry, very sorry for his brother! His face and his manner were like their father's. He had been a constant grafter, and he had tried to keep his spirits up in the same way when things were bad. Yegor remembered how in the hunger of 1933, their father had somehow managed to get hold of three handfuls of unthreshed wheat, and loudly announced to the family: "Now we're doing fine, lads!" Their mother had boiled up grain, but he refused to eat, in the same cheerful, jolly voice: "You eat, I already stuffed myself on the way with raw grain! My belly's swelling up." He wanted the young boys to get as much as possible. Just like Fyodor now ... swaggering and joking, but he was unhappy about something, it was clear. But what way was there to comfort him—he could see everything, for himself, a big man like him...

"Yes," said Yegor. "Alright then. Never mind, brother, never mind. Take a deep breath."

"What was this story that you told her?" Fyodor asked. "About the bunny who went for a balloon ride."

Yegor tried to think. It took him a long time to remember... You could see on the large features of his kindly face how hard he was trying to remember. And when he did remember, his face lit up.

"About the bunny! Yes, it's like this: once a bunny went to the bazaar with his father. And there he saw balloons—lots and lots of them. All different colours-red, blue, green..." Yegor glanced happily at his brother, and told the story as though he was telling it to little Vera herself, without reducing the mystery and the mischief, embellishing the story and postponing the conclusion in every possible fashion. "So. And the bunny started to pester his father: buy me some, buy me some. And his father bought some. He bought some and went on holding them himself. And then he saw that they were selling carrots! 'Here/ he said, 'hold the balloons, and I'll get in the queue." So the little bunny took them... And would you believe it— just at that moment there was a puff of wind, and our little bunny was lifted off the ground. And carried off, far away! He flew way up above the clouds..."

Fyodor listened intently to the story, even sniffing forgetfully a couple of times.

"What do we do now?" Yegor asked his brother. Fyodor did not understand.

"What do you mean, what do we do?"

"How shall we save the bunny?"

"Well, you save him somehow," chuckled Fyodor. "In a helicopter, maybe."

"We can't use a helicopter, the wind from the propellers would scatter the balloons all over the place..."

"How, then?"

"Well, so everyone is looking up and thinking how to do it. And the little bunny is shouting as he hangs up there, waving his legs about. His father is going crazy... And suddenly along comes a little girl, little Vera, let's say, and she shouts out, 'I know how!' When my Nina was small she would say that, 'I know how'. So little Vera shouts out 'I know how!' And off she runs into the forest and calls together all the birds—she knows a magic word for that, she only has to say it, and all the animals and the birds do what she tells them—so she calls together the birds and she tells them: 'Fly to the bunny and peck his balloons one by one. Not all at once, or else he'll fall. Prick one balloon at a time, and the bunny will start to come down.' So, that was how the little bunny was saved from disaster."

Fyodor shook his head, chuckled and reached for his cigarettes. And in order not to smash another expensive liqueur-glass, he gathered up the wide sleeve of his dressing-gown with his other hand.

"That's a fairly contemporary fairy-tale. I thought you'd have some magicians in there, and the old grey wolf..."

"No, I deliberately tell them stories like that, so they get used to life more quickly. Let them learn as much as they can. But all those wizards and

queens... Life isn't really like that nowadays. The wizards we have nowadays..."

"Yes, real wizards, they are... Real wicked dragons!" laughed Fyodor.

"Not to mention the witch Baba-Yaga: there's one in every house. We won't wake yours up, will we? We're talking loud..."

"My witch?" Fyodor chuckled again. "Never mind that. I don't even have a witch, Yegor," he said, lowering his voice, "just an empty-headed tailor's dummy. But that's what I deserve, grey-haired old fool that I am! You know..." Fyodor was about to let slip some secret of his own, but he gestured hopelessly and said nothing. "What's the point of talking about it?"

Yegor was struck once again by how different this Fyodor was from the forceful, pushy man he was in public and on his construction sites...

"There's something bothering you, though, brother," said Yegor. "Tell me about it ... maybe I'll be able to. say something to help."

"It's nothing," said Fyodor, embarrassed. And to cover his embarrassment, he reached out again for the cigarettes. "I'm a bit off form today... I've loosened up a bit with you. Everything's okay, Yegor. Everything's fine." He was silent for a moment, gazing at the table, then he shook his grey head, looked at his brother with a tired smile, and repeated: "Everything's fine. It's good that you came... Really. You know, I began to dream about our father a lot. Either we're mowing with him, or we're at the mill... I must be getting old. I'm certainly not getting any

younger. I dream about horses a lot too... I used to love horses."

"We're both getting old," agreed Yegor.

"Let's drink ... to the bright memory of our parents." Fyodor filled two liqueur-glasses with cognac. "We're coming to the end of our own road now... Eh?" As though struck by the thought, so simple and so clear, Fyodor went on sitting there for some time with the liqueur-glass in his hand, at first looking at his brother, then back at the table, looking intently at the table, almost as though he was angry with it. He roused himself, swung his glass in invitation to his brother, and drank. "Yes," he said, "you've got me all stirred up... But I don't understand just how. Probably I'm just very tired after these last few days. I used to think no trouble would ever get me down and then... Well, never mind. I don't really care much about anything!" He shook himself and his eyes gleamed as they gazed out from under his beetling brows. "What I do care about is my little daughter. But ... we'll tighten our belts and carry on. Right?" he asked his brother, as though he was asking a lot of other people during the day, at work on his building sites, he asked him without expecting any answer, because everything was quite clear. "Right, Yegor, right. Lie down and get a couple of hours' sleep, and then our little Vera will wake up. And I'll stay here and do a bit of paper-work... Do a best of thinking. Oh yes," he suddenly remembered, "will you tell me what I should buy for your wife? Some little present..."

"Forget it!" Yegor exclaimed angrily.

"Why? I'll get a phone call soon from a ... from a wizard ..." Fyodor laughed sincerely, heartily. "A real wizard if ever there was one! A wizards' wizard, he has absolutely everything... What should I get, tell me."

"Forget it, I tell you!" Yegor repeated angrily. "What sort of nonsense is that, presents and such things! What for?"

Fyodor smiled as he looked at his brother, and nodded in agreement.

"Okay. Go and get some»sleep. Your bed's all ready... Goon."

Yegor quietly stole into one of the other rooms, got undressed and sat on the edge of the divan bed that was spread with fresh sheets... He sat for a while. He glanced around... He looked at the window—the small frame was open. He took his cigarettes out of his pocket and lit one. He smoked, shaking the ash into the palm of his hand. He did not feel like sleeping.

Fyodor came into the room.

"Listen," he said, "I'm really worried I might have upset you there, with all that nonsense... God knows what you might think. Eh?" Fyodor smiled. He sat down beside Yegor on the divan, and he even gave his brother a jolly slap on the back. "I'm really fine. Everything's okay, I tell you! Why are you looking at me like that?"

"What? It's nothing... There's nothing on my mind. What do you mean?"

"You're looking at me ... almost as though you were sorry for me."

"Come on, lad!" exclaimed Yegor. "What are you talking about?"

"Alright, then. Sleep a little bit, you probably didn't sleep in the plane, did you? Sleep."

"Okay," said Yegor. "I'll get some sleep. I'll go to bed when I've had a smoke."

"Hmm." Fyodor left him.

Yegor gently shook the ash into his palm, propped his elbows back on his knees, and began thinking again. He did not feel like sleeping.

VANKA TEPLYASHIN

Vanka Teplyashin was in the village hospital with a duodenal ulcer. He had been there for quite a while when some fellow from the regional centre turned up. The doctor called Vanka to his office, and he and the other fellow turned Vanka this way and that, squeezed him, mashed his stomach, and tapped his back... They discussed something among themselves then said to Vanka:

"How would you like to go to the hospital in town?"

"Why?" asked Vanka, who couldn't figure out what was going on.

"They can take care of you there, the same as here. And Sergei Nikolayevich will be your doctor."

So Vanka agreed.

He was well cared for in the city hospital, and soon, the whole staff was calling him the "classic case".

"Where's our classic case?" the nurse would ask.

"Having a smoke in the can, most likely," replied the other men in Vanka's ward. "Where else could he be?"

"Smoking again?! I don't know what we're going to do with that classic case of ours!" the nurse would say with a sigh.

For some reason, Vanka didn't like the city hospital very much. He spent most of his time telling the other men in the ward about the

various adventures which had befallen him in life: about how he had almost lost his driver's license the year before and how he had sunk his truck in the river...

"There was a big mound of ice ahead of me, so I opened the door and hit the gas. Suddenly, the ice cracked, and I was going down!.." Vanka talked hurriedly, waving his arms and jumping from one place to another in his story. "I went sliding down like it was a real hill! Water beat against the windshield! A chunk of ice hit the door, and it slammed shut. So there I was sinking fast with the door jammed— I couldn't get it open for the life of me. I was already swimming inside the cabin, so I opened the door on the passenger's side, slipped out, and went up to have a look around."

"Yeah, right. You 'slipped out and went up to have a look around!' No sense in lying to us—we weren't born yesterday, fellow."

Vanka, his honest eyes popping out, raised up on his bed.

"Me, lie?!" he sputtered, but couldn't find another word to say for a while. "Wha... I'm not kidding. How could I possibly lie? Wha..."

And true enough, if you took a good look at Vanka, you would realize he really couldn't lie. After all, lying, just like anything else, is something you have to know how to do.

"So tell us what happened next, Vanka. Don't pay any attention to him."

"So I looked up and saw some kind of blue hole overhead. I started swimming for it with all my might."

"How long were you actually under water?"

"I have no idea. Not very long, I guess. It's just taking me a long time to tell the story. And I keep getting interrupted..."

"Well, what happened next?"

"I crawled out of the hole, that's what. There were already people running toward me. They took me to the closest house."

"And I bet they poured vodka down you first thing."

"No, first they rubbed me down with Red Carnation cologne to warm me up, so I reeked of it for a whole week. Then they ran to get some vodka."

...Vanka didn't even notice how the melancholy set in. He would stand by the window for hours, looking down at the street below—a street quite alien to his heart and mind. It was strange indeed: lots of noise and shouting, but no one could hear anyone else. Everybody was in a hurry, but from his vantage point high above, all the people looked exactly the same, and it seemed they weren't really getting anywhere: they were just running in place. Soon, Vanka grew accustomed to the people and cars in the street below... Once in a while a really hot number in a mini-skirt would pass by, and he would follow her eagerly with his eyes. But aside from that, it was all the same. Vanka was seized by melancholy and felt very lonely indeed.

So you can imagine his joy and amazement when down there, in the world below, he suddenly caught sight of his mother... She was making her way across the street, glancing from

side to side, afraid of getting hit in the traffic. It was his dear mother, his very own mother! So she came after all!

"My mama's coming!" he shouted out joyfully to everyone in the ward.

This surge of human ecstasy was so unexpected that all the men burst out laughing.

"Where is she, Vanka?"

"There she is—the lady with the big shopping bag!" Vanka leaned impossibly far out of the window and shouted: "Hey, Mama! I'm up here!"

"You'd better go downstairs to meet her," the more experienced patients told Vanka. "Officially, there aren't any visiting hours today, and they might not let her in."

"Sure they'll let her in if she tells them she's come all the way from the village," one of the men said.

"She'll never get in no matter where she came from if that skinny orderly with the red eyes is on duty at the door! Boy, is he a mean one!"

So Vanka raced downstairs.

But his mother had already been stopped by the skinny orderly with the red eyes. She was asking him to let her in to see her son, but he wouldn't even listen to her.

"She's come to see me!" Vanka began to explain as soon as he saw what was happening. "This is my mother."

"We have visiting hours only on Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday!" the red-eyed orderly recited in a wooden voice.

Vanka's mother was overjoyed to see him and was about to race past the orderly to meet him, but he stopped her at the door.

"Not another step!"

"I told you, she's come to see me!" Vanka shouted. "What's the matter with you?!"

"We have visiting hours on Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday," the orderly repeated in his deadpan voice.

"But I had no way of knowing that," his mother pleaded. "I've come all the way from the village to see my son. Honestly, I didn't know. Can't we just sit somewhere to talk for a little while at least..."

Vanka was shocked by how pitiful his mother's voice sounded. She had switched intentionally to a tiny, pitiful voice to plead with this man... And Vanka was ashamed that his mother would allow herself to be humiliated. So he told her to be quiet.

"Don't say another word, Mama. I'll talk with him."

"I'm just trying to explain why..."

"Not another word," Vanka ordered her. "Listen here," Vanka began, addressing the orderly. But the latter did not deign to glance in his direction. "Listen, fellow, it's you I'm talking to," Vanka continued, raising his voice.

"Vanka!" His mother gasped in warning, knowing how easily her son could fly off the handle.

The orderly continued to stare indifferently into the distance as if no one were standing behind him and in front of him.

"Let's go over there and have a seat," Vanka said calmly to his mother, indicating a bench behind the orderly. And he walked placidly by the man.

"Get back in here!" the orderly spat out as he attempted to grab Vanka by the sleeve.

But Vanka was ready for him, and as soon as the orderly touched him, Vanka jerked his arm up sharply, knocking the orderly's hand away. Paling visibly, but still calmly, he told his mother:

"Let's go sit on that bench right over there."

Vanka had anticipated the orderly's next move too. He knew the skinny, red-eyed fellow would try to grab him from behind. Sure enough, the orderly latched on to the collar of Vanka's striped pyjamas and jerked so hard, it hurt Vanka's throat. So Vanka grabbed the orderly's wrist and mashed so hard, it made him grimace with pain.

"If you touch me one more time," Vanka hissed softly but menacingly right in the orderly's face, then paused, trying to find the words to continue, "then you ... and I are going to have serious trouble."

"Vanka, please don't," his mother begged, almost in tears. "Dear God, oh, dear God..."

"Have a seat," Vanka told her in an almost hoarse voice. "Sit down right here, and tell me how everything is at home..."

The red-eyed orderly froze for a moment, then jerked into motion and raised the alarm in a loud voice.

"Where's Elizaveta Sergeyevna?! Yevstigneyev, get over here on the double!" he shouted. 'This fellow is breaking the rules!" With that, he

spread his arms wide as if he had to catch a raving lunatic, and lit out after Vanka. But Vanka sat right where he was, merely tensing his body and looking up at the orderly. But that gaze was sufficient to stop the man dead in his tracks. He glanced around and shouted once more: "Yevstigneyev!"

From a room that was off to one side emerged his fellow orderly, Yevstigneyev, a huge, broad-shouldered fellow in a white lab coat. Yevstigneyev had a half-eaten bun in his hand...

"What?" he asked, not understanding what rule was being broken and where.

"Over here!" shouted the red-eyed orderly, spreading his arms wide and preparing to attack Vanka again.

But Vanka was ready for him, and the orderly went flying.

By then Yevstigneyev realized what the matter was and went after Vanka.

...But the second orderly didn't manage to put a scratch on Vanka either, though Yevstigneyev was a big strong man. The two of them went after him with all their might, but to no avail. Vanka tried to be careful so fewer chairs would go flying. But hard as he tried, the duty-orderly's desk got knocked over anyway, and a pitcher of water sitting on it was smashed to smithereens. With that, a hue and cry was raised, and people in white coats came running from everywhere. One of them was Sergei Nikolayevich, Vanka's doctor. The others barely managed to calm down Yevstigneyev and the red-eyed orderly. Vanka

was taken back upstairs by Sergei Nikolayevich himself. The doctor was extremely upset.

"How in the world did all that happen, Vanka?"

Now, for some strange reason, Vanka was perfectly calm. He realized that now he would go home. He even told his mother to wait for him.

"Why in the devil were you fighting with them?" the young doctor asked, unable to comprehend the reason. Vanka respected Sergei Nikolayevich greatly.

"He wouldn't let my mother in."

"You should have gotten me, and I would have let her in. Go back to your ward, and I'll bring her up to see you right now."

"There's no need to. We're going home now."

"I can't let you go home now! You're not well yet!"

But Vanka wouldn't give in. He was actually surprised at himself. He realized he was so calm because he knew he was going home. Sergei Nikolayevich took Vanka to his office and tried to convince him to stay. He even said:

"Look, your mother can stay at our house for a few days—she can stay as long as she wants. We've got plenty of room. You're not well yet, Vanka. I can't let you go. It's not fair to me for you to run off before I'm finished with you. Don't pay any attention to those idiots downstairs—they're both hopeless! I'll let your mother come to visit you every single day!"

"No," said Vanka, remembering the pitiful voice his mother had used to plead with the red-eyed orderly. "No, we really couldn't..."

"I won't sign the papers for you to leave!"

"Then I'll jump out of window. I'll run off in my pyjamas in the middle of the night!"

"Well," sighed Sergei Nikolayevich in disappointment. "I'm sorry you feel that way..."

"Don't worry about it," said Vanka, feeling quite cheerful already. He was just a bit sad that the doctor was so disappointed. "You'll find another patient with ulcers... That red-headed guy by the window in our ward has ulcers, too."

"That's not the point, Vanka. You really shouldn't leave yet. You're not well."

"No, I'm going home anyway," Vanka announced, feeling better every minute. "Please don't be angry at me."

"Well, what can I do?.." said Sergei Nikolayevich, still quite distressed. "I can't force you to stay, but perhaps you'll think about it before you make a rash decision. Calm down and think about it for a while..."

"No, I've already made up my mind."

With that, Vanka raced off to the ward to collect his things.

When he got there, all the other patients started fussing at him:

"You idiot! Where do you think you're going!"

"Don't you know Sergei Nikolayevich would make sure you were all the way well before he let you go home?!"

But none of them understood that soon, he and his mother would be on the bus, and he'd be home in a couple of hours. There was no way any of them could understand that.

"You're going to let some stupid orderly interfere with your good health! Don't be an idiot, Vanka!"

"He has to be a human being first of all," Vanka announced with vengeful calm verging on solemnity. "Don't you see?"

"Sure we do. It's too bad you let your temper get the best of you."

"You should have slipped that red-eyed fellow fifty kopecks, and everything would have been fine. Don't you see?"

Vanka cheerfully bid them all farewell, wished everyone good health, and headed down the stairs with a light heart.

He had to hand in his hospital garb and get his street clothes, which were stored down in the basement. As luck would have it, Yevstigneyev was issuing the street clothes that day. He looked at Vanka with no malice in his eyes and said with slight regret:

"So they threw you out... Well that's what you get..."

As he was handing Vanka his clothes, he leaned over and whispered with belated reproach:

"You should have given him fifty kopecks, and everything would have been fine. No noise, no trouble. But you young people! What's the world coming to! Didn't you realize that's what he wanted?"

"He should be a human being, not a money-grubber," Vanka intoned importantly. But there in the stuffy basement reeking of moth-balls, surrounded by a multitude of coat-hangers, these

lofty words did not sound solemn at all. Yevstigneyev didn't even notice them.

"Are these your shoes?"

"Yes."

"It's stupid to go home before you're well..."

"I'll get well at home."

"What makes you think so? I wouldn't be so sure..."

"Goodbye and good health to you!" said Vanka.

"And the same to you. Why don't you try to explain things to the doctor? If you had a talk with him, he might let you stay. Why in the devil did you have to get tangled up with that idiot?"

Vanka didn't bother to explain the actual state of affairs to Yevstigneyev. He just rushed back upstairs to his mother, who, he was certain, was sitting with the-red-eyed orderly crying her eyes out.

Vanka was right: his mother was sitting on the bench behind the orderly's desk, wiping the tears from her eyes with her shawl. The red-eyed orderly was standing straight as an arrow at his post, staring down the corridor, on the look-out for wrong-doers. Vanka's heart started poundering as soon as he caught sight of the man. He wanted to give the fellow a piece of his mind in the strongest terms possible, but he just couldn't find the right words.

"Good health to you," said Vanka. "Prissy pants."

The orderly blinked in surprise but didn't turn his head. He just kept staring down the corridor.

Vanka took his mother's bag, and they left the city hospital which had such a fine reputation thereabouts— as rumor had it, they could practically cure cancer.

"Don't cry," Vanka said to his mother. "What's the matter?"

"It seems you can't go anywhere without getting in trouble," his mother voiced her bitter thought. "It was the same at the vocational school..."

"Î. Ê. Enough already. The heck with that stupid vocational school, too. But there's one thing I've got to tell you: please don't ever beg and plead for anything the way you did with that old fool orderly. Î. Ê. ?"

"You'll never get anywhere if you don't ask once in a while."

"Yes, but not the way you were doing it. I was so ashamed!"

"Ashamed, were you? Here I am running around trying to get all the papers signed for my pension. If I never ask anybody, I won't get very far, will I?"

"Î. Ê. Enough already," Vanka conceded. He could never out-argue his mother, that was for sure. "How is everything at home?"

"Just fine. So will you go back to our hospital until you're well, then?"

"I don't know," said Vanka. "I feel a lot better already."

A short while later, they were at the bus station, and soon they were on the bus, headed for home.

THE STUBBORN FELLOW

It all began when Monya Kvasov read in some book or other that a perpetuum mobile was impossible for various reasons, not the least of which was the existence of friction. By the way, the nickname Monya deserves an explanation as well. His real name was Dmitry, or Mitya for short. But his grandmother called him Mitry, and sometimes Motka or Motya when she was feeling particularly affectionate. It was his friends who dubbed him Monya, since this monicker seemed more suitable for the fidgety lad. It distinguished him from the others and emphasized his restless, obstinate character. So Monya read the book which explained that a perpetuum mobile was impossible, and that many had failed in the attempt to invent such a machine. He carefully studied the drawings of perpetual motion machines which had been proposed over the centuries. Then he started reflecting upon this problem, not troubling his head over friction or the laws of mechanics. He had his heart set on inventing a perpetuum mobile of a kind which had never before been imagined. For some reason, he refused to believe that it was impossible. He had often pooh-poohed sober-minded thoughts and come up with something absolutely wild of his own, saying to himself: "What the heck do they think they're trying to prove?" And now he was thinking: "Just what does impossible mean anyway?"

Monya was twenty-five. He lived with his grandmother, although he had a mother and father somewhere. When he was just a baby, his grandmother had taken him away from them and brought him to live at her house, because his parents were forever splitting up and then getting back together. She had raised Monya herself. He finished the seven-year village school and continued his education at the agricultural vocational school. He spent a year and a half there but didn't like it, so he quit and went to work on the collective farm until he was drafted. He did his two-year hitch in the army, where he acquired the profession of truck-driver. So now he worked as a driver at the collective farm. Monya was tow-headed with high cheek-bones and tiny, deep-set eyes. His large jawbone jutted out, giving him an expression of perpetual stubbornness and arrogance. And that expression reflected his character pretty accurately: if he made up his mind to do something, whether it was learning to play the accordion or—like the year before— deciding to keep his grandmother's kitchen-garden the way it was, a bit larger than the size permissible under the current law, in which connection the village council had suggested that the wattle fence be moved a bit closer to the house—he devoted all his energy to the realization of that idea. He would become so obsessed by it, he couldn't think about anything else but playing the accordion or refusing to move the fence. And he always won out in the end. And that's how it was with the perpetuum mobile: Monya ceased to see or comprehend

anything around him and devoted all his time and energy to the great task of invention which lay before him. No matter what he was doing—driving, eating supper, or watching TV—he was constantly mulling over the idea for his perpetuum mobile. He had already thought up about a dozen plans but had rejected each in turn. His mind was working frantically. Monya would jump out of bed at night and sketch out another in a series of wheels. Wheels had been at the root of his quest from the very beginning.

He kept trying to find a way to keep a wheel spinning forever.

And finally, he did. This is how it worked: take any wheel, say, a bicycle wheel, and attach it to a vertical axle. To the rim of the wheel, firmly attach (at a forty-five degree angle to the hub) a trough in such a fashion that some sort of weight —a one kilogram dumb-bell, for example-can slide freely up and down it. Now, if to the vertical axle to which the bicycle wheel is attached, a metal rod is firmly fastened (welded) so that the free end of that rod passes above the trough where the dumb-bell is sliding... So when the dumb-bell slides down the trough, it will bump into the rod. Well, not bump exactly, but press against it. So the dumb-bell will press against the rod. And the rod is attached to the axle. So naturally, the axle would start to turn, and so would the wheel. That was the way to make a wheel spin on its own.

Monya had thought this up one night. He just jumped out of bed and drew a sketch of the wheel, the trough, the rod, and the dumb-bell. He

didn't experience any particular elation. He just wondered why so many people had been beating their heads against the wall for so long when the solution was so simple. He strode about the main room in his underwear, calm and proud as he could be, then he sat down on the windowsill for a smoke. A hot wind was blowing in from outside, and the young birches were swaying and rustling by the fence; it smelled of dust. Suddenly, Monya imagined the vast expanses of his native Russia as an enormous plain. He saw himself on that plain, walking calmly down the road, his hands in his pockets, glancing around... There was nothing more to this walk. He was just going along, and that was it, but it conveyed to him a sense of his own greatness. A body strolled about on this earth—quietly, without any shouting—taking a look at what there was all around and then making his exit. Only after he was gone would anyone take notice that someone pretty special had been among them. A remarkable fellow, indeed. Monya strode about the room a while longer. If he had been wearing his trousers instead of his underwear, he would have shoved his hands in his pockets and strutted about like that—because that's what he felt like doing. But he was too lazy to put his trousers on just then. Not exactly too lazy, but ashamed to make so much fuss about it all. Peace filled Monya's soul—an overwhelming sense of peace. He got back in bed but couldn't get to sleep till morning. He didn't worry about the perpetual motion machine any more: he had solved that problem. So he lay on top of his blanket and gazed at the stars. The

hot wind grew a bit cooler towards morning: now it was warm but not stuffy. The dark sky began to pale like faded blue gingham. And that particular stillness of dawn, fragile and short-lived, hovered beyond the window. Soon that stillness was frightened away by the creaking of a gate nearby. Then the chain creaked and whined as a bucket was being lowered into the well... People were starting to get up. But Monya was still lying in bed staring out the window. Nothing in particular had changed, but life had become somehow desirable and very dear to him. The devil take it all! How was it that a person could live here and not notice at all that everything around was wonderful, simple, and absolutely priceless. Monya lay there another half hour and then got up, too. He wasn't usually such an early riser, but he couldn't fall back to sleep anyway.

He sat down and had a look at his sketch... How strange that it didn't excite him or give him any joy. He was still filled with a profound inner calm. Monya lit a cigarette, leaned back in his chair and began to pick his teeth with a match-stick for no particular reason other than to emphasize via these insignificant actions the enormity of what had occurred that night and been recorded on the little scraps of paper lying there on the table. It gave Monya incalculable pleasure to see the blueprint for a perpetuum mobile on the table, so he picked his teeth, reflecting: "So what do you think of that, my friends?! You stumpy lot can do nothing better than to huff and puff with your wives in your hot featherbeds at sunrise. Then you'll go strutting

around all day, looking pleased as punch, carrying out your insignificant tasks and knitting your brows as if you were actually capable of serious thought. Oo-la-la! You mean to tell me you can actually think! Well, would you have a look at that! After all, you thought up a wash-stand, didn't you? And that sure did take a lot of brain work. Ah, my fellow man..." And with that, Monya grinned and walked over to that most human of all inventions, the washstand, to wash up. All morning, Monya was in that sardonic mood. His granny noticed that he was strangely blissful. She was a merry old soul and plenty strong, and she loved her grandson very much but was careful not to show it. She didn't think life was terribly complicated either: people were born, worked hard to earn their daily bread, and died when their time came. The main thing was not to give up when the going got tough, but to find a way out somehow. During the war, for example, this was how she had managed to get along: she noticed a crack in the floor of one of the collective-farm granaries, and through this crack the wheat trickled out bit by bit. The back wall of the granary faced the road, but that whole side was hidden from view by a thick growth of stinging nettle and weeds. So at night, Old Lady Kvasova made her way through the weeds with a little sack. She was scratched and covered with whelps from the nettles, but she got to the grain. The granary was a tall one, and the floor was high off the ground: high enough for a person to crawl under. So Kvasova picked up every grain of wheat and widened the crack with her knife...

Then, for a week she would crawl under the granary with her sack at night, and in this fashion, she got a fair amount of wheat. During the hungriest time, she would grind the wheat in a mortar, mix a little pine bark into the flour, and bake bread. Thus, she escaped starvation. Motka was like a son to her, even dearer perhaps, because now she had no one else. There was her daughter, of course (her two sons had been killed in the war), Monya's mother, but she had gotten mixed up with that husband of hers and lived a different, hectic kind of life in the city. Nothing much had come of her, and she never showed her face in the village. So the old woman had a daughter, but it was the same as if she had none.

"What's the matter with you today?" his granny asked Monya while they were having breakfast.

"What do you mean?" Monya inquired with calm condescension.

"Pleased with yourself. Like the cat that ate the canary. Did you have a good dream?"

Monya thought for a minute then replied insinuatingly:

"I dreamed I found a briefcase with ten thousand roubles in it."

"The devil with you and your dreams!" chuckled the old woman. Then she fell silent for a moment and asked: "Well, what would you do with the money?"

"And what would you do?"

"I'm asking *you.*"

"No, but what would you do with it? What do you need?"

"I don't need anything. Well, maybe I'd take this old house of ours apart, clean up the timber, replace the rotten logs, and put it back together again."

. "You'd be better off building a new house. Why should you bother sorting through a bunch of rotten wood?"

The old woman sighed and was silent for a long time. "Rotten wood or not, I'll spend the little time that's left me right here. I've already planned everything for how they'll carry me out of here feet first when I go to meet my maker."

"Let's not start that again!" Monya said testily. He loved his grandmother, too, though he may not always have been aware of it. But there was one thing that bugged him no end: when she started talking about dying. These conversations were hardly prompted by ill health, frailty or a sense of doom. No, the old woman wanted to live and hated the very thought of dying. She only pretended to have reconciled herself to this inevitability. "I don't want to listen to all that."

The wily old woman smiled with feigned resignation.

"Well, what do you think? You don't expect me to live another century or two, do you? My time will come..."

"Well, when it comes, it'll come, but why waste time talking about it beforehand?"

However, that was exactly what the old woman wanted to talk about. It was just a shame Motka couldn't stand such conversations, because she loved to chat with him. She thought he was smart

as a whip and couldn't imagine why the rest of the village didn't seem to share her opinion.

"So tell me about your dream..."

"It was nothing really... It's just that I feel good this morning."

"Well, the best time to feel good is when you're young. When you're old, you'll get the misery in your bones, and you won't feel like much of anything..."

"Don't worry," Monya announced loudly yet casually, finishing his repast. "We'll show them a thing or two before it's over."

With that, Monya headed for the garage. But on the way, he decided to drop in on the Tractor Repair Station engineer, Andrei Nikolayevich Golubyev, who was fresh out of college. Though Golubyev wasn't a local fellow, he pretty much knew the score. A bit on the gloomy side, true, but he knew how to keep his mouth shut. Monya had talked with the engineer a time or two and liked him fairly well.

Monya found him in a fenced-in yard working on a motorcycle.

"Hey there," said Monya.

"Hello," replied the engineer, but not right away. He gave Monya an unfriendly glance—he probably hadn't liked his visitor's familiarity.

"Never mind," thought Monya. "He's still wet behind the ears."

"I came to tell you a few things," continued Monya, entering the yard.

"Well, what things?" asked the engineer, looking at him once again.

"What do scientists think about the perpetual motion machine?" Monya blurted out at once. He perched himself on a log, pulled out his cigarettes, and peered up at the engineer.

"What do you mean, a perpetual motion machine?"

"You know. A perpetuum mobile. An ordinary perpetual motion machine of the kind they've never been able to come up with..."

"So what about it?.."

"What do they think about it now, for instance?"

"Who are 'they'?" snapped the engineer, who was beginning to get irritated.

"Scientists and such like. Have they just forgotten about it, or what?"

"They aren't concerned with it in the least. They have more important things to do."

"So does that mean they've forgotten about it entirely?"

The engineer bent over the motorcycle again.

"Yes."

"Don't you think it's a bit too soon?" persisted Monya.

"What do you mean, 'too soon'?" inquired the engineer, glancing up once more.

"Too soon to have forgotten about the problem."

The engineer peered attentively at Monya.

"So have you invented a perpetual motion machine yourself, or what?"

And Monya peered just as attentively at the engineer. He thrust his earth-shaking announcement at the man's diplomaed head like

a little boy poking a stick into an ant hill to stir it up.

"Yes, I have."

Still squatting, the engineer stared even harder at Monya. He did not even attempt to conceal his grin as he handed the stick back to Monya, replying succinctly, but with an acid tongue:

"Congratulations."

This made Monya a little bit nervous. It wasn't exactly that he had any doubts about the validity of his invention, but he was astounded by the firmness of the universal conviction that a perpetual motion machine was impossible. Even after it was invented, people would still go around swearing it was impossible. And arguing with them about it was a gloomy and thankless task. All Monya's obstinacy and stubbornness were in fact defense mechanisms to keep him from getting hurt—he was a natureally trusting and agreeable soul, after all.

"So what next?" asked Monya.

"What do you mean, 'What next'?"

"Well, I appreciate your congratulations, but what do I do next?"

"Well, now you have to go through all the formalities— to gain recognition for your invention. Have you already made a working model or have you just thought it up?"

"Thought it up."

"Well, in that case," began the engineer, grinning and shaking his head, "you'll have to get on the move, won't you... Write off somewhere about it—I really don't know."

Monya was silent for a moment, stung by the engineer's implied mockery.

"Well aren't you even interested in finding out about my machine? The principle, even? You're an engineer, so you of all people should be interested."

"No, I'm not," the engineer announced firmly. "I'm not the least bit interested."

"Why?"

The engineer finished fiddling with the motorcycle, wiped his hands on a rag, tossed the rag on to a log, fished a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, and gazed down at Monya from above.

"Listen, fellow, you told me you studied at the votech for a while..."

"Yes, a year and a half."

"So why are you going around talking nonsense? You're a truck-driver, and you know something about technical matters. Therefore, I find it hard to believe that you actually take this perpetual motion machine nonsense seriously."

"You haven't even found out how it works, but you're labelling it nonsense!" objected Monya, feeling his hackles rise. He recognized the familiar twitching in his chest—an unpleasant chill and twitching. They were sure signs that a fit of stubbornness was coming on.

"I already told you, I have no desire to find out about your invention."

"Why?"

"Because it's nothing but a lot of balderdash. You should realize that yourself."

"But what if it's not balderdash after all?"

"Test it first, and then come talk to me about its operational principles. But if you want a piece of advice, don't waste your time."

"Thanks for the advice," said Monya, rising, "and for your kind attention."

"Listen here..." said the engineer intractably, but with seeming regret, "Don't be so touchy. In a minute you'll be telling me about all the money they wasted on me at college..."

"What does college have to do with anything? I didn't come here to ask for your credentials..."

"Well then what is this all about? Have you been bitten by the invention bug, or what?!" exclaimed the engineer. "You're not an ignoramus, after all. You've had some technical education, and then, like a bolt from the blue you come up with an eternal motion machine. Don't you think that if it were possible one would have been invented long before your time? You should realize that at least."

"That's the problem. Everyone thinks it's impossible, so they've all given up without even trying..."

"There's nothing to give up. It was proven long ago that a perpetual motion machine is impossible, and that's that. I could understand your attitude if you'd only had a couple of years of elementary school, but you've had quite a bit of education. So how could you possibly have gotten mixed up in all this silliness?!" exclaimed the engineer quite angrily. He was extremely irritated and didn't try to hide it. "What did you do the eight and a half years you spent in school,

after all?" he demanded, glaring sternly at Monya.

"I smoked in the loo and fought a lot," Monya retorted just as angrily, peering straight into the engineer's eyes. "Why are you carrying on so? Who are you trying to impress? I'm not after your lousy job, if that's what you're worried about."

"You see there?!" sputtered the engineer, a bit taken aback by the onslaught of stubborn malice summoned forth in response to his own. "You can talk intelligently, and that means you're not the nitwit you're making yourself out to be. So why in the devil do you want to get mixed up in all this perpetual motion business and make a fool of yourself?!" With that, the engineer dropped his cigarette butt and ground it into the earth with his heel. Then he walked over to start up the motorcycle.

Monya moved away from the fence.

He was in a turmoil. That engineer had gotten the best of him, and he was ashamed that he had taken the licking so calmly. Now Monya's rage at his interlocutor grew to serious proportions. Worst of all, he had begun to doubt the perpetuum mobile he had designed. So he headed straight for home to have a look at the design. He strode quickly, staring down at his feet. He had never been so ashamed in his life. And more than anything, he was ashamed of the cocky self-assurance, contentment, and peace he had felt that morning. He should have checked everything out first. What in the devil had sent him running off to the engineer half-cocked?!

His grandmother wasn't home, and it was a good thing, too, because she'd be plaguing him with questions and concern. Monya sat down at the table and spread the drawing out in front of him. So what did he have here? There was the dumb-bell, and it was pressing against the rod. Did it really press on the rod? Yes, it did. Sure it did! What else could it do? Then Monya remembered how the engineer had asked him what he had done for eight and a half years in school, and he fidgeted nervously in his chair then went back to the drawing. Well?.. The dumb-bell pressed against the rod, forcing it to move. It would move, wouldn't it? Sure! And it was welded to the axle at the other end, so what was the frigging problem? And just why was it impossible? Now Monya was really worked up. Worked up and mighty impatient. OK, he had spent eight and a half years in school. But this was a sure thing! He jumped out of the chair and paced about the parlor. He couldn't figure out what was wrong with them all. Let them prove that the dumb-bell wouldn't press against the rod and that this wouldn't make the rod move. Why wouldn't it move? It would, by all means. Anyone could see it would have to move, and then the axle... Why, heck! Monya didn't know what to do. He had to do something, or his heart would burst from the excitement, and his skin would crack from the strain. Monya picked up the drawing and left the house, headed he knew not where. He would have gone back to see the engineer again, but he had already left. Maybe he wasn't gone yet after all. So Monya strode swiftly off in

the direction of his house. His shame had been replaced by an overpowering impatience which made him want to run. And run he did—a little way, at least—down a lane where there weren't any people.

The motorcycle wasn't in the yard any more, and suddenly, Monya felt his heart sink. More mechanically than with any set goal in mind, he entered the engineer's house. Only his young wife was in. She had risen not long before and was still in her bathrobe. Her face was puffy with sleep, and she hadn't combed her hair yet.

"Hello," said Monya. "Has your husband left?"

"Yes."

Monya was about to leave, but something stopped him.

"You're a school teacher, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes, but why do you ask?" the young woman queried in surprise.

"What subject do you teach?"

"Math."

Monya didn't notice the disorder which embarrassed the engineer's wife. Nor did he pay any attention to her dishevelled state. He walked straight over to the table.

"Take a look here, please. Your husband and I are having a disagreement about something. So come have a look."

The young woman stood indecisively for a moment looking at Monya. She was attractively plump.

"What's the matter?" asked Monya.

"What have you got here?" inquired the teacher as she walked up to the table.

"Look here," Monya began to explain his drawing. "This is a metal trough made out of steel or something. Do you see? It goes like this. And it's attached at an angle to the rim of this wheel. Then if we put a dumb-bell or some kind of weight here at the top... And if this rod is fastened to the axle, the dumb-bell will roll down and move the rod... It will move the rod, won't it?"

"It will press against it..."

"Sure it will! The rod will move away from the dumbbell, won't it? And then what will the axle do? It will turn, won't it? And what about the wheel? It's fastened tight to the axle, remember?"

"What is this anyway, a perpetual motion machine?" asked the teacher in surprise.

Monya sat down on the chair and looked at the teacher, not saying a word.

"Well, what is it?"

"You just said what it is yourself!"

"A perpetuum mobile?"

"Yes."

The teacher's rosy lips curved in amazement as she stared and stared at the drawing. She drew up a chair and sat down, too.

"Well?" inquired Monya, lighting up a cigarette. There was a fluttering in his chest again, but this time, it was from joy and impatience.

"The wheel isn't going to turn," announced the teacher.

"Why?"

"I don't know just yet... I'll have to do some calculating. But it shouldn't turn, I can tell you that much."

Monya slapped his knee hard, rose, and began pacing about the room.

"Well, it seems to me," he began. "That book-learning has addled your brains. Why won't it turn?" insisted Monya, pausing to stare hard at the woman. "Why?"

The woman looked just as hard at him but with a certain amount of alarm. It seemed she was even a bit afraid.

"Do you want the wheel to turn?"

Monya ignored her stupid question and continued to insist that she give him an answer:

"Why won't it turn?"

"How did my husband explain it to you?"

"Nohow. He just tried to shame me," said Monya, leaning over the drawing once more. "You tell me why the wheel won't turn. The dumb-bell presses here. Right?"

"Yes."

"And that makes the rod..."

"You know what," the teacher blurted out, interrupting Monya in the middle of his explanation. "Why are we just sitting here guessing? Why don't you let Alexander Ivanovich the physics teacher explain it to you? Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"He lives not far from here."

So Monya picked up his drawing and was about to leave. He knew where the physics teacher lived.

"But wait for me, OK?" requested the teacher. "I'll be ready in just a minute. I'm interested to hear what he has to say myself."

So Monya sat down to wait.

The teacher seemed a bit flustered, and finally she told him: "I have to get dressed."

"Oh, sorry," said Monya, catching on. "I'll wait on the porch." Monya walked over to the front door, but he looked back at her from the threshold and said with a grin: "What a to-do, huh?"

"I'll be ready in a minute," came the reply.

The physics teacher, a kindly old Volga German named Heckmann, listened to the excited Monya with a smile. He examined the drawing and heard Monya out.

"Well, would you look at that!" he exclaimed to the young math teacher with genuine delight. "Look how he's thought everything out! There are some clever people around here..." He broke off and turned to Monya and launched into an explanation of his own. The more excited he grew, the thicker his German accent got: "Look here, I will change practically nothing in your original construction-just a couple of minor details. I'll take away your trough and your dumb-bell, and to the rim of the wheel, in place of a trough, I'll fasten another rod, but vertically. Like this..." Heckmann drew his wheel and "fastened" a rod to it. "We'll rig it up like this... Do you see?" Heckmann was terribly pleased. "And now, to this vertical rod, we'll fasten a spring. Like this..." He drew in the spring. "And at the other end..."

"I saw a motion machine like that in a book," Monya interrupted him. "The wheel won't turn if you hook it up like that."

"Aha!" exclaimed the physics teacher ecstatically. "And why not?"

"Because the spring exerts equal force at both ends."

"So you understand that, do you? Then let's take a look at your version with the dumb-bell. You have a dumb-bell lying in a trough pressing against a rod. But here, the dumbbell plays the same role as the spring, and you understand why the spring doesn't work. The dumb-bell exerts equal force on the rod and the trough. Absolutely equal—not a little more or less on one or the other. So the wheel won't turn."

That seemed perfectly horrific to Monya.

"That's impossible!" he exclaimed. "How can that be? The dumb-bell just slides along the trough and you can make the trough even steeper, but it presses against the rod anyway. How can you say the force is identical?!" exclaimed Monya, glaring fiercely at the teacher, who was still filled with an inexplicable joy.

"Yes!" the older man insisted with a smile. He was probably overjoyed at the constancy of the laws of mechanics. "It's absolutely identical. The two forces only seem unequal. But I assure you that here, we have absolute equilibrium..."

"You and your equilibrium can go to the devil!" Monya spat out bitterly. He snatched up his drawing and left.

Once again he strode quickly towards his house, convinced that it was nothing but a plot-

the devil only knew what! The engineer and those teachers were simply conspiring against his idea. It was clear that the wheel had to turn! It had to turn, yet they insisted that it would not. Now wasn't that a fine kettle of fish?!

So Monya hotfooted it on home, and when he got there, he wrote a note that he didn't feel well, found his grandmother out in the garden, and told her to take it to the collective-farm office. Without any further explanation, he went to the shed and started work on the perpetuum mobile.

...And make it he did. He struggled with it till darkness fell and added the finishing touches by lamp-light. He took the wheel from his bicycle and used an old laminated bucket for the trough. He didn't weld the rod, though: he fastened it to the axle with bolts... In short, everything exactly according to plan.

When he was done, Monya hung the lantern up high, sat down on a block of wood next to the wheel, and smoked a cigarette. Then, quite calmly, he gave the wheel a kick to start it spinning. For some reason, he had wanted to start the eternal motion precisely with his foot. He leaned against the wall and started condescendingly to watch the wheel turning, which it did for a while. Then it stopped. Then Monya started the wheel spinning with his hand. He made it spin and spin, then stood staring with amazement and malice at the gleaming spokes of the metal wheel. It had stopped again. Then Monya realized that the counterbalance wasn't

sufficient. The trough and the dumb-bell had to be balanced! So he did just that. Again, he started the wheel turning with all his might, and again he sat down to wait. Shortly, the wheel stopped spinning. Monya wanted to destroy his creation, but then changed his mind... He sat for a little while longer, got up, and with a heavy heart walked blindly away.

He came to the river, sat down on the bank, felt around for pebbles, and tossed them into the dark water. But the river brought him no peace. It splashed against the rocks and sighed in the darkness by the far bank. All night, the river muttered anxiously to itself as if flowed ceaselessly on. In the center where the current was swiftest, the moving surface glittered, but by the bank, it flowed sluggishly, stirring tiny pebbles; it swirled and eddied around the bushes, hissing angrily on occasion, but more often, seeming to laugh very quietly—almost in a whisper.

Monya was not suffering. He even liked being alone there. Everyone was making fun of him, but it wasn't the first time, and it probably wouldn't be the last. True, people were apt to do foolish things, but no one in the village had ever tried to invent a perpetuum mobile. That would give them something to talk about for the next month or two, but he didn't care: people had to have something to make fun of, after all. They worked hard, but there weren't any amusements in the village to speak of. So let them have their laugh: he didn't mind. Monya even felt a certain affection for them. He did not resent his fellow-

villagers and even thought with mild regret that he probably shouldn't argue with them so much. Why argue? They all had their crosses to bear, and they should do it without an angry word. At this point, he began to feel a bit sorry for himself.

Monya sat on the riverbanktill dawn. Cleansed completely of the distress caused by his failure, he washed up in the river, ascended the steep bank, and walked down the street that stretched out along the river without any particular goal in mind. He had no desire to sleep. "I should get married," he thought, "and raise some kids— three or so— and watch how they develop as they grow up." That would give him the peace he was seeking. He would stride about ponderously and slowly, looking at everything placidly, condescendingly, and with a touch of irony. Monya was quite taken by calm men.

It was already completely light. Without quite noticing how, Monya found himself at the engineer's house once more. He hadn't done it on purpose, of course. He was just walking by, and he happened to catch sight of the engineer by the fence. Again, he was working on his motorcycle.

"Good morning," said Monya, stopping by the gate. He gazed calmly and cheerfully at the engineer.

"Hi!" replied the engineer.

"It's turning, you know!" announced Monya. "The wheel, I mean."

The engineer glanced up from his work and fixed his gaze on Monya for a while, wondering whether to believe him.

"The perpetual motion machine, you mean?"

"Yes. The wheel... It's still spinning. It turned and turned all night long. I got tired of watching it, so I decided to take a little walk."

Now the engineer was utterly confused. Monya looked tired and honest as the day was long. He didn't look embarrassed in the least, but was filled with a placid inner light.

"Are you serious?"

"Come with me, and you can see for yourself."

The engineer came out of the yard and walked over to Monya.

"What is this? Some kind of a trick?" he insisted in disbelief. "What have you come up with?"

"It's no trick. It's out there in the shed propped up on the floor, turning and turning."

"Where did you get the wheel?"

"From a bicycle."

The engineer stopped dead in his tracks and announced:

"Well, sure it will turn: a bicycle wheel has a good bearing, that's why it's spinning."

"True enough. But even a fantastic bearing wouldn't keep it turning all night," insisted Monya.

They continued walking.

The engineer didn't ask any more questions, and Monya was silent as well. The blissful mood which had descended upon him at dawn did not desert him: it was such a good mood that he found it interesting himself.

"You're sure it's been spinning all night?" the engineer couldn't resist asking as they reached Monya's house. He stared hard at the young man,

but Monya met his gaze and replied with feigned amazement:

"The whole night, I tell you! I gave it a kick to start it at about ten in the evening, and—what time is it now?"

But the engineer didn't stop to look at his watch. He strode beside Monya in extreme puzzlement, which he tried hard to disguise for the sake of his title and reputation in the village. Monya wanted to laugh, but he managed to conceal his mirth.

"Are you ready?!.." he said solemnly, as they stopped in front of the door to the shed. He looked at the engineer, kicked the door open with a flourish, and stepped aside to let'him pass and catch sight of the wheel. Then Monya hurried in after him, because he wanted to see how the engineer would react when he saw that the wheel wasn't spinning.

"Well," said the engineer. "I thought you had some trick up your sleeve at least. This isn't very funny, young man."

"Gee, I'm sorry," said Monya, pleased with himself. "Let's go inside. I've got some cognac tucked away, and we could have a little snort,"

The engineer eyed Monya with curiosity then broke into a grin.

"Very well."

So they went inside, trying not to make any noise, and they got almost to the end of the front hall before his grandmother heard them.

"Motka, where were you all night?" she asked.

"Go back to sleep. Everything's OK," Monya told her.

They went into the parlor.

"Have a seat," Monya said. "I'll get everything ready..."

"Don't make a fuss!" whispered the engineer. "There's no sense in getting anything ready so early in the morning."

"Well, OK," agreed Monya. "I wanted to get us some meat pies from the kitchen at least, but if you don't..."

When they had downed a glass of cognac apiece and lit up their cigarettes, the engineer looked at Monya with curiosity once more.

"Well, you didn't believe me, did you?" he asked, grinning. "You had to try it for yourself. I bet you worked on that contraption all night, didn't you?"

Monya, however, was pensive and calm, as if he already had three kids and was watching them grow up.

"I wasted the whole day on it yesterday... But that's not the point," Monya said without the slightest bit of regret or bitterness, but rather, with genuine, profound curiosity. "The problem is, I really don't understand why the wheel won't spin. It ought to spin, after all."

"No, it shouldn't," said the engineer. "And that's the truth."

They gazed at each other... The engineer smiled, and Monya realized he wasn't a bad fellow after all. His smile was simple and trusting. The collective farm had probably taken advantage of his youth and keen sense of responsibility and dumped so much work on him

that he'd forgotten how to smile and didn't have the time to be sociable.

"You should get a bit more schooling, you knuckle-head," the engineer advised him. "Then you'll see why the wheel doesn't keep on spinning."

"What does schooling have to do with it?" Monya objected with displeasure. "Everybody's stuck on getting an education. That's all they talk about. But I bet there are a lot of educated fools running around."

The engineer chuckled and rose from his seat.

"That's true enough. However, there are even more fools without an education. But that's not the point. I'd better be going."

"Will you have another shot?"

"No thanks. And I wouldn't advise you to have any more either."

The engineer left the parlor and tried to creep quietly down the front hall, but Monya's grandmother was already awake. She peered down at him from her warm stove-bed and said:

"You don't have to tip-toe. I'm not asleep."

"Hello, grandmother," the engineer said in greeting.

"Hello there, my boy. Why aren't you asleep? A fine young fellow slinking around like an old man with insomnia. A young fellow needs his rest, after all."

"What will we do when we get old, then?" the engineer inquired cheerfully.

"I can tell you now, you won't get any sleep then, either," the old woman replied.

"Well, I guess we'll catch up on our sleep sometime or other, somewhere or other."

"Maybe in the next world..."

Monya sat in the parlor and looked out the window. The upper panes were tinged pink with the sunrise. The village was waking up. Gates were creaking, and cows were mooing as they were sent out to pasture. People were talking and shouting back and forth somewhere. Everything was as it should be. Thank goodness at least that much was clear to Monya. The sun rose and set day after day, un-reachable, inexhaustible, and eternal. And everyone down below was busy doing something or other—shouting, rushing about, working, or watering the cabbage patch. Counting their blessings. Top of the morning, folks!

A VILLAGE TO CALL HOME

A certain Nikolai Grigorievich Kuzovnikov had lived a fine, perfectly normal life. At one point in time—the beginning of the thirties it was—when mighty winds of change were blowing people hither and thither, he was caught up in the flurry of movement, and it took him from his native village to the city. At first, the city filled him with melancholy, then he took a good look around and realized that with a bit of pluck and wit, especially if he didn't take a job that required back-breaking labor, he could have a fairly easy life. So he went to work in a warehouse and stayed there even during the war. Now he lived in a big city and had a fine apartment of his own. (His children had done well by themselves and had apartments of their own.) He had grown old now and was about to retire. Had he ever stolen anything from the warehouse he was in charge of? Well, that was a ticklish question. From the point of view of some young whipper-snapper with a law degree, yes he had done his share of pilfering. But a more discriminating and sober-minded individual would realize it wasn't theft at all, because he never took more than he needed to escape want and deprivation. And especially if you considered how much he could have made off with if he'd been genuinely dishonest, the matter of

theft seemed perfectly ridiculous. Was that any way to steal?! He took what he needed, but he never forgot himself or gave any indication that he lived better than anyone else. So not one of those fellows with sheepskins from the university ever laid a finger on him. Nikolai Grigorievich experienced not a twinge of conscience—and it wasn't because he had no conscience. Not at all. It was just that things had worked out that way right from the start. Conscience had nothing to do with it. All it took was a bit of caution, nerves of steel, a lack of innate greed, and a little common sense. But as for conscience, well, you know... When a man's secret larder was full, it was all right to talk about matters of conscience. But still, a fellow would sleep more calmly if he had thought everything out in advance, weighed all the possibilities, and tied up all the loose ends. Pangs of conscience were not for him. Let the others worry about such things if they wanted. There was no reason for a fellow with empty pockets to talk of conscience—that was hardly a smart thing to do.

In a word, everything was fine. Nikolai Grigorievich had travelled most of the way down the long road of life, and once, when he was in a good mood, he paused to commend himself: "Good work, old boy. You never got sent to prison, and you didn't get knocked off during the war."

But there was one strange thing about the old man which he probably couldn't have explained even if he'd wanted to. But he had no desire to explain it, and he didn't give it much thought. He

simply gave in to this whim (if it was in point of fact a whim at all) as he had given in to so much else in life.

This is the peculiar thing he had been doing for the past five or six years.

On Saturdays when he got off work, when his wife was waiting for him at home in their warm apartment, when everything was in order, and he was at peace with himself, he downed a glass of vodka, hopped on the tram, and headed for the railway station. The station was huge, and it was always crowded. There was a place next to the rest-room where the men went to smoke and talk, where the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife. Nikolai Grigorievich always made a bee-line straight for it and struck up a conversation.

"Hey, fellows," he would ask. "Are any of you from the village?"

Inevitably, a good number of them were, because that was where the village men hung out after they had finished their business in town.

"Well," one of the men would say. "What is it that you need?"

"I'm looking for a village to make my home. You wouldn't happen to know of any place that's looking for a good warehouse man, would you? I've got thirty-four years of experience..." And Nikolai Grigorievich would tell them in great detail with simple trust and obvious pleasure that he was from the village himself but had left many years before to work in the city. He had devoted his life to his warehouse, and now, in his old age, he was pining to go back to the village... And then it would begin. Everyone understood his longing

perfectly well and agreed that no matter how long a villager lived in the city, sooner or later, he would want to move back to the country. Then the men would begin to name various villages he could choose from. Nikolai Grigorievich could hardly jot down the addresses fast enough. Next the arguments about which village was better would begin.

"What's so great about that Vyazovka of yours?!"

"Don't be so quick to judge! You've never even been there, and you don't know a single thing about Vyazovka!.."

"I know that village like the back of my hand, and it's not the kind of place a body would want to go to retire. An old man needs the beauty of nature to soothe his aches and pains..."

"What does nature have to do with it?" another bunch would pipe up. "First of all, this fellow needs a place to work. Does that Vyazovka of yours have a warehouse? After all, he asked about where he could find work, not how many birch groves you've got there."

"Well, birch groves are important, too," Nikolai Grigorievich would add.

"That's just what I mean! Who cares about warehouses? They're all over the place these days. But if you take..."

"You lot are just running off at the mouth to have something to say," announced an important-looking fellow. "Finding a warehouse isn't much of a problem these days. First of all, he has to worry about getting a place to live. Our village

has a warehouse, a river, and a lake, even. But houses are terribly expensive/

"About how much?" asked Nikolai Grigorievich, hankering after details.

"That depends on what you're looking for."

"Something pretty big and in good condition."

"Do you need a barn and a few sheds, too?"

"Well, I'd need a Russian steam bath, a woodshed, a little barn where I can do a bit of woodworking in my free time."

"Well, a good-sized house," the important-looking fellow began, doing the necessary mental calculations, "with a nice steam bath..."

"A nice one, mind you—not some ramshackle old shed!"

"A good steam bath, a split-log barn—almost all the barns in our village are built with real split logs..."

"Does your village have a power-saw bench?"

"Not right in the village, but there's one not far away."

"Well, how much?"

"If you take everything into account—a house with a good-sized vegetable garden..."

"My old lady and I don't need a very big garden..."

"Well, with a decent-sized one then. They don't have really big gardens any more. But if you take everything into account, I'd say three or three and a half."

"Thousand?!" someone would ask in amazement.

"No, roubles, you dimwit!" snapped the important-looking fellow.

"Don't you think you're a bit wide off the mark?

Nothing could be that expensive," the others objected in disbelief.

The important-looking fellow lost his air of importance in an instant.

"Why should I lie? There's no reason for me to exaggerate—I'm not trying to sell my house, after all. I'm just telling it like it is... The man asked a serious question, and I gave him a serious answer."

"Why should a house in your village cost so much? That's simply flabbergasting! What's so great about that village of yours?"

"Nothing. It's just an ordinary village with a state farm."

"Why should a house cost so much? Have you all lost your minds, or what?!"

"No, we're perfectly sane. It's the people who sell their houses for the lumber—those are the crazy ones. I can't imagine doing such a thing."

"I've heard about that, too. I've heard you can get yourself a good house for three hundred roubles."

"I don't know about for three hundred, but..."

"What's your village called?" asked Nikolai Grigoryevich, pencil poised to jot down the name.

"Zavalikha. And it's not really a village. It's a lot bigger than most villages."

"And where is it?"

"From here, this is how you get there..." And there followed a detailed explanation of how to get to Zavalikha.

"Is it a regional centre, or what?"

"It used to be, but then they moved the centre to Krasnogorsk."

"So you probably have some kind of a warehouse or other there..." Nikolai Grigorievich prompted him.

And the man replied obediently and in great detail. He was glad his village had proved more interesting than the rest to this stranger. The others stood around listening, experiencing something which resembled envy. Finally, they found a fly to put in his ointment.

"Why are the prices there so high? There probably isn't a forest for miles around!"

"Well, I bet you don't have any woods either!" replied the man from the village where the prices were so high, getting a bit nervous. "So tell me how much a big house would cost in your village—only be honest. Don't think you can fool me!"

"Why should I lie? A nice big house with a garden and a couple of sheds costs about fifteen hundred or two thousand in our parts."

"And where is that?" inquired Nikolai Grigorievich, turning to face the man.

The one who had caught his interest now began to explain in just as much detail as the one before where his village was, what the river there was called, and how much meat cost there in the fall...

"One of my in-laws came... It was fall, then, too... He takes a look around and says, 'Well, it looks like your village is a fine place to live,'"

"Where's he from?"

"A city called Zlatoust to the east of the Ural Mountains."

"So why are you bringing some stupid city into the discussion? We're talking about country life."

"Well, he doesn't live right in the city. He lives in a village not far away."

"Still, there's no reason to drag it into the conversation. This fellow is interested in the places we come from. If I wanted, I could tell you about my in-laws in Magadan. That's even farther away."

"Stop talking nonsense! Pretty soon you'll be telling us about your relatives in America."

"What does America have to do with it?"

"About as much as Magadan."

"Here we are talking about a village and you go sticking in your Zlatoust! Why in the devil did you do that?"

"Calm down, calm down now," Nikolai Grigorievich said in a reconciliatory tone. Oddly enough, he became somewhat of a boss here in the manner of a foreman handing out assignments to a crowd of waiting day-laborers. "Calm down, fellows. This isn't some Oriental bazaar, after all. But there's one more thing I have to know: how far is your village above sea level?" This was a question for the fellow whose village has the cheapest houses.

The man didn't know. None of them knew how far above sea level their villages were.

"Why in the world do you need to know that?"

"Oh, it's very important," Nikolai Grigorievich explained, "because of my heart and circulatory system. If a village is elevated even a little bit, I couldn't possibly live there, because the decreased oxygen would be bad for my heart."

"We've never noticed it ourselves," admitted the men gathered around him.

Of course, Nikolai Grigorievich had said this to make himself look important. They continued to chat about the price of houses, barns, and food, about whether a village had a river or perhaps a lake close by. About how far away the forest was... Then the subject gradually shifted to the topic of how wonderful village people were—calm and friendly, not a thief or a loudmouth among them. And gradually, without noticing it, the men began to exaggerate slightly the sterling qualities of their neighbours. It began quite naturally, with no ulterior motives on anyone's part. One fellow would start talking about his neighbours, then another would feel compelled to throw in his bit, but in such a way as to make it clear that his fellow villagers were better than the rest.

"Listen here—if one of our women goes to the well for water, she never locks her door—there's no reason to, because no one will come in, not even a Gypsy. She just props it shut with a stick and goes about her business. We've got plenty of Gypsies, mind you, but we've taught them good manners."

"Who are you trying to kid?! Take our village now. We've got a thief..."

"A thief! You don't mean it!"

"Yes, a thief. And we all know it: he's been in and out of jail half a dozen times for his thieving ways. But anyway, we have this old school marm —she even has a medal for years of loyal service. So anyway, this thief came right up to her in broad daylight and said: 'Let me stay with you for

a week or two.' She had been his first grade teacher years before, you see. He had been an orphan, and she had apparently worked at his orphanage. Or something like that. 'Let me stay with you for a couple of weeks/ he told her, 'until I find myself a job somewhere.' "

"So did she let him stay there?"

"She sure as heck did, and we all thought, 'Well, he'll clean her out sure as we're livin.' We even felt sorry for her."

"But don't you know a thief will never steal from the place he's living. That's part of their code of honor."

"Sure, I know. Everyone knows that."

"Well, did he clean her out?"

"No, he didn't touch a thing. He managed to resist somehow."

"That's just part of their code of honor, I tell you. If he'd lifted anything, he'd get it hot from his fellow thieves!"

"But I tell you, he didn't steal a thing!"

"Anyway, it's still pretty strange. Even the thieves don't give a damn about that honor any more! Honor my foot! Last year some snake-in-the-grass stole a haystack from me!"

"That wasn't a thief, that was one of your neighbors for sure. Why the devil would a real criminal need a haystack?!"

They all started laughing and remembered other things that had happened over the years, all of them chain-smoking with such fury that the air stung their eyes. The time passed without their noticing, and before long, it was time to

leave. Waiting at the railway station was hardly one of life's pleasant endeavors.

"Once I was headed home from the regional centre," began a fellow with an air of efficiency about him, "and I saw an old woman by the side of the road. Must have been eighty or eighty-five if she was *a* day. I pulled over, and she said, 'Take me to Krasnoye, sonny.' Well, it must have been a good sixty-five kilometres to Krasnoye, so I asked her if she had anything to pay me for the trip, because it was really out of my way. 'Sure I do, sonny,' she told me, so I took her all the way to Krasnoye." At this point, the man's eyes began to flash in expectation of the denouement. "When we got there, I said, 'This is it, granny, so pay up.' So she rummaged in her bag for a while and pulled out five eggs!"

The others burst out laughing, and the man continued, pleased as punch:

"So she told me, 'Well, in the old days, we used to pay with eggs, and people were always glad to have them/ 'Î. Ê.,' I told her. 'Go on, granny. Don't worry about it! "

Then the man repeated several times what he had told her: 'Go on, granny. You can't get blood from a turnip, can you?' This signified that he was in fact a kind man, too. It was obvious from these discussions that the villages were full of kind, simple, artless, selfless people and no others. And though once in a while, you might run into a troublemaker or malicious, stingy soul, but only rarely.

Nikolai Grigorievich had quit writing down addresses and was just listening, turning from

one side to another, and laughing along with the rest... He listened with such good-natured joy that the men kept on talking with just as much pleasure, telling one story after another of amazing human selflessness. True, once in a while, some jealous character or liar would poke his ugly mug into a story, but that wasn't important. Everyone agreed tacitly that it was nonsense, for the world was actually ruled by reason and goodness.

"I saw them selling beer on tap earlier today, so I stood in line, and when my turn came, the lady didn't even pour me a full mug. She just filled it up to here and shoved it at me without even looking up, then went on to the next fellow. I walked away and thought: 'Where I come from, we wouldn't even tell her thank you for service like that!"

Everyone agreed that in the city, people were always in a hurry. There were crowds everywhere, and that shameless lady had taken advantage of the fact. But if you thought about it, she hadn't cheated him out of very much. Of course, she'd have some extra change by the end of the day. Moreover, it wouldn't kill you to do without that extra sip or two she cheated you. And she probably had kids to feed, too.

But the one thing the village people could never understand about the city was the rudeness. There didn't seem to be any explanation for why people were always yelling and being mean to each other. It was better not to ask a sales lady or an office clerk about anything, even if you didn't understand; you

would get such a dressing down, it would make your ears burn. When they got to this topic, the men all gave each other friendly glances of surprise, signifying a total lack of comprehension. Nikolai Grigorievich didn't understand this urban phenomenon any better than the rest of them. He experienced the same emotions. And at this point, he would always press someone to the rest-room wall, jostle him, and explain in a loud voice:

"That's exactly why I want to leave! Exactly why! I can't stand it any more. Do you think I live badly here? Not at all! I have a two-room apartment for just me and my old lady! But I can't take it any more! City life makes me sick!" As Nikolai Grigorievich pressed that fellow to the wall and shouted into his face, his suffering was quite sincere. He beat his chest and almost burst into tears... For the moment—and this was the most amazing thing—he forgot totally that he did more than his share of yelling at the warehouse. He was always shouting at the drivers and loaders, and God forbid anyone should ask him a question. All that was momentarily forgotten, and there arose in his soul the sincerest offense at all the yelling, arguing, and insulting that went on in the city. The hell with city life and his two-room apartment—the devil take it all! He would be better off buying a house in the country and living out the rest of his days with self-respect, as befitted a human being. He didn't want to be part of the crowd—he simply couldn't do it! He was a human being, after all. How dear were these words of human dignity and calm to Nikolai Grigorievich. How good it felt and how necessary

it was for him to shout them out... Sometimes, the others even fell silent, and his shouts would be the only ones ringing in the smokey, pungent air. The others felt genuinely sorry for him and wanted to help.

Having spoken his peace, Nikolai Grigorievich would head for home with the addresses in his pocket. He always walked, though it was quite a way. It took him a while to calm down after all that excitement. His soul ached just a tiny bit, and he felt tired. By the time Nikolai Grigorievich reached home, he was always hungry as a bear.

He had no intention of going anywhere. He didn't really want to move back to the country or anything of the sort. But he couldn't live without going to the railway station now. It had already become a necessity. If anyone— his elder son, for example—had tried to shame him and forbid him from writing down all those addresses and chat with the village men, he would have found a way to sneak off to the station and do it anyway. How could anyone think of forbidding him? He simply couldn't live without it now.

AFTERWORD

"I am a writer first and foremost..." said Vassily Shukshin. The public, however, first encountered Shukshin as a remarkable and original acting talent, whose stature was clear from his very first cinema role, the lead in the film *The Two Fyodors.* He followed that performance by creating even more strikingly unforgettable screen roles, acting in twenty films in all. "The most powerful event in the picture *By the Lake* is Vassily Shukshin. Not an actor at all, but a Human Being. Authentic to an extreme ... the only character possible. Here the Russian school of acting is demonstrated at a pinnacle of incomparable strength," wrote Alexei Arbuzov, a major Soviet dramatist. For his performance in the film *By the Lake* Shukshin was awarded the USSR State Prize. And still to come were his roles in the films *Stoves and Benches, Those Red Berries, They Fought for Their Mother/and...*

Shukshin's debut as a director was equally dramatic. The first film that he directed from his own script, *There Is Such a Lad,* had a triumphant run in the cinemas of the USSR and won the "Golden Lion", the supreme award of the Venice Film Festival. The second film he directed, *Your Son and Brother,* was awarded the State Prize of the RSFSR. *Strange People* and *Those Red Berries* confirmed the existence of a

distinctive and fertile Vassily Shukshin "school" in the Soviet cinema.

And nonetheless Vassily Shukshin remains "a writer first and foremost". His very first collection of short stories attracted a lot of attention from the public and the critics, and the books of stories that followed—*Men of One Soil, Characters, Conversations Under a Clear Moon*—together with the novels *The Lyubavins* and *I Have Come to Bring You Freedom,* firmly established his reputation as one of the most talented and original of Soviet authors.

Shukshin wrote primarily of village life, of which he possessed a first-hand knowledge, and with which his entire view of the world was organically linked. But from the very beginning he saw the problems and conflicts of the countryside as events of national, and even generally human significance. His view of the world was not based on the superiority of the village over the town, but on the superiority of human values over Philistinism, not on nostalgia for the passing of the patriarchal order, but on pain at our irresponsibly negligent treatment of the centuries-old moral traditions.

Vassily Shukshin's life was short, only 45 years. He died in the autumn of 1974, on location, when shooting the film *They Fought for Their Motherland,* based on Mikhail Sholokhov's novel of the same title. Shukshin was playing Andrei Lopakhin, a hard worker and a fighter such as Shukshin was in real life. Shukshin's life began in difficult circumstances, and it was never easy. He grew up during the Great Patriotic War, from the

age of 14 he worked in the fields of a collective farm, and later in a tractor factory and on building sites. Later he taught literature at school and became a headmaster... In 1954 he entered the Ail-Union Institute of Cinematography. He was thirty years old by the time he finished studying, but this is hardly cause for regret. His powerful talent had been extraordinarily enriched by a profound knowledge of life. He grew in stature with each new work; he had something to say to people, and he knew how to say it.

And the public took him to their hearts. In the days immediately after his sudden death, more than 160 thousand letters arrived at his Moscow address from people shaken by the premature demise of this remarkable man.

In 1976 Shukshin was posthumously awarded the supreme Soviet honour, the Lenin Prize for Literature.

The book you have just read is the third English-language edition of stories by Vassily Shukshin (1929-1974) to be published in Moscow. The two previous editions (1974, 1978), with translations by Robert Daglish, aroused considerable interest in the author's work outside the Soviet Union. Avril Pyman, the well-known English translator. Russian scholar and professor of Durham University, recommended that her students read one of these collections. "I set them a composition on the theme, 'What have you learned about the Soviet Union from reading Shukshin?' Their answers astounded me. They declared that this book had completely changed

their ideas about Russia." The publishers also received numerous letters in response to the editions of Shukshin's stories.

This edition comprises twenty seven of the author's finest stories, among them nine (in Robert Daglish's translations) which were included in the previous collections. The others are published here for the first time. The translations have been made from a new edition of Shukshin's collected works, which was based on extensive textual research.

Sergei Zalygin, chief editor of the journal *Novy Mir,* wrote: "If Shukshin had been just an actor, just a director, just a script writer and dramatist or even just a writer, then in each particular case we would have been dealing with a major talent. But these are all the talents of one man. Such an astounding combination is unprecedented in Soviet art."

REQUEST TO READERS

Raduga Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

Please send all your comments to 17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.

Василий Шукшин. Рассказы. На английском языке. Перевод сделан по изданию: В. Шукшин. Избранные произведения. В 3-х тт. М. "Художественная литература".

Редактор русского текста А. Кудряшова Контрольный редактор Л. Киржнер Художник Е. Шешенин Художественный редактор Т. Вахлина Технические редакторы М. Лубянская, Н. Духанина

И Б №5852

Сдано в набор 29.01.90. Подписано в печать 25.10.90. Формат 84x108/32. Бумага офсетная. Гарнитура Универс. Печать офсетная. Уел. печ. л. 18,9. Условн. кр.-отт. 39,06. Уч.-изд. л. 18,64. Тираж 8590 экз. Заказ № 274. Цена 2 р. 70 к. Изд. № 6259. Издательство "Радуга" В/О Совэкспорткнига Государственного комитета СССР по печати. 119859, Москва, ГСП-3, Зубовский бульвар, 17. Отпечатано с оригинал-макета способом фотоофсет на Можайском полиграфкомбинате В/О Совэкспорткнига Государственного комитета СССР по печати. 143200, Можайск, ул. Мира, 93.

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

2 p. 70 к.

Vassily Shukshin (1929-1974) was born in the village of Srostki, Altai Territory. After graduating from the village school he worked on a collective farm and on building sites. After his term of national service he taught literature at school. In 1954-1960 he studied at the All-Union Institute of Cinematography. He acted in about twenty films and directed five films to his own scripts. His first story was published in 1959, and his writings included the novels *The Lyubavins* and *I Have Come to Bring You Freedom,* several film scripts, and more than two hundred short stories. He was posthumously awarded the Lenin Prize for Literature.

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